

1986

## Kunapipi 8 (3) 1986 Full Version

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### Abstract

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KUNAPIPI

# KUNAPIPI



VOLUME VIII NUMBER 3  
1986



*Kunapipi* is a tri-annual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The journal is the bulletin for the European branch of the Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies. As such it offers information about courses, conferences, visiting scholars and writers, scholarships, and literary competitions.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with footnotes gathered at the end, should conform to the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association) Style Sheet, and should be accompanied by a return envelope.

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COVER: 'Wedding in Wartime, 1915'. Etching by Barbara Hanrahan.

#### ERRATUM:

In Volume VIII, No 2 (the West Indian issue) in the interview with Wilson Harris, p. 35, l. 20, the sentence should read 'the particle is a wave'.

*Kunapipi* refers to the Australian aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol both of creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory in Australia.

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## Cats Currell

*That's the cyclamen house; that's the orchid house that was washed away — it was never built back, but the fern house was. That's the shade house (the little shade house as they called it), and that's the potting shed where they potted up the plants. That's the hot house — there's a boiler house up the top of it. That's the soil house and that's the little fern house. On the end of the packing shed is what they called the boys' room; any workmen who lived in — they slept in that room. That's the vehicle shed and the laundry, the apple house (that's two-storey, that's where they stored their apples), the hay shed, the chaff house. There's the stables. That's the wall round the stables with stones on the top, and the palm house was back from that.*

*And on the end of the big shade house was the dairy, and the cow shed was up there (they had about half a dozen cows in my time, they used to have a lot in the earlier days). They used to carry the milk from up there through the yard, out through there and round there and over into there and separate it. They had a lot of horses to take the plants to market. I was a child, but they treated me like a king...*

He was born at Brandon's Nursery in the Hills, and the maids in the big house used to tease him. He had white hair, and to begin with he had ringlets, and in the photo taken in Adelaide they hung to his shoulders and he wore a sailor suit, the first suit he ever wore after he put off his dresses, and button-up shoes. His mother played with his hair and made it curl. When it was cut everybody nearly cried, they reckoned it was a terrible shame to cut off his curls and his mother kept them in an envelope. After that, if his hair was getting a bit long, one of the men at the Nursery cut it for him.

He was always mucking round the Nursery, he knew every inch of the whole place. When he was a little fellow, before he went to school, he almost lived with the men — wherever they were working you'd find him. He followed them everywhere, and when they went to market with a load of stuff they'd take him, too. On Sunday afternoons in summer, when they went for a swim at Highercombe Dam, the big meeting place for all the lads round the district, they'd take him with them. He made himself a general nuisance, he was the general manager — they called

him The Manager. His other nickname was Cats, because if he saw a cat he'd go up and pat it or pick it up and nurse it. If anybody said his real name — Maurice — nobody knew who they were talking about, even though young Mr Brandon had named a begonia Maurice Currell after him.

Old Mrs Brandon wouldn't touch a drop, but all the other Brandons drank like fish, though they didn't go mad because they knew when they'd had enough. Old Mr Brandon had died through drink — one night, coming back from the Appleton Hotel, he fell off his horse and it went home without him; he was still lying there in the morning and died a few days later. Old Mrs Brandon was an 'I Am' sort of person who gave Cats five shillings every Christmas and she had a grey pony called Tommy that she drove in a trap; she wore an ostrich feather in her bonnet and said she was the oldest native-born person in South Australia. After his father died, young Mr Brandon was the boss and he was twenty odd years older than the maid who was the worst tease, but he married her and she was a nobody but then she was young Mrs Brandon.

Cats' father was in charge of the glass houses: they were beautiful places. The orchid house was best of all, with pink the most popular colour, though the plants didn't smell, they just looked nice; the ferneries contained what had once been the largest collection in the colony. Outside, behind the hedge of giant rhododendrons, was a rosary of four hundred varieties of rose and there was a big fruit garden where they grew pears, plums, peaches, cherries, loquats and every apple you could think of.

On Sundays, Cats wasn't supposed to go poking round the Nursery, but he kept sneaking off and then swish, bang, wallop — when he came home to tea his father cut a stick off a tree and bashed him round the legs. Once Cats' father had a darkish moustache but one day he shaved it off — nobody knew why — and he looked terrible, a different person. He was a small man and when he finished work at the Nursery, he'd pick up his gun and go out along through the paddock to see if he could get a rabbit. Pompom, his Pomeranian mongrel dog, always went too; she'd race round like a mad thing for a while and then as soon as they got up on the side of the hill, she'd settle down and trot alongside him. When Pompom saw a rabbit (she always saw one before Cats' father) she'd stop and hold up one front paw. Cats' father would say, 'Where is he, Pom, where is he?' She'd stand and stare and after a while he might see it, too. As soon as the gun went off there was no halting her. Many a rabbit Cats' father got that he'd only wounded — when it ran away Pompom scented it up and caught it.

They didn't eat the rabbits: Cats' mother just pulled the skin off and gave them to Pompom and the cat. She was a little woman who worked hard — scrub, scrub, scrub — and she loved a cat as much as Cats did, she said it wasn't home without one. When a cat died, Cats' mother wrapped it up in an old jumper and buried it in the garden. First there'd been Fluffy, who was white; the next was a tortoiseshell; then they had another one called Fluffy that slept on Cats' bed and kept his toes warm.

The Nursery was down in a gully, surrounded by steep hills covered with gum trees. Their house was by the big cypress tree and it had a verandah all round and a rail fence out the front and in Cats' mother and father's bedroom one picture said LOOKING UNTO JESUS, above a bunch of red roses, and another, HE IS FAITHFUL THAT PROMISED, inside a border of pansies.

The August old Mrs Brandon had her seventy-fifth birthday party, it had been raining all day. The Brandons were sitting down to dinner in the big house when there was thunder and lightning and hailstones; and when the flood came down the gully, Cats and his mother and father stood out on their front verandah that was four feet above the road, and the water was lapping it. Cats' father started walking up and down saying, 'All the glass house'll go,' and Cats was howling, thinking that their house would be washed away. Every glass house was destroyed, except the cyclamen house, and after the storm they dug up hailstones as big as passion fruit.

When the War came a lot of Hills boys went, even the workman at the Nursery who was Cats' best friend. He told Cats he was going when they were carting apples, and Cats tried to give him the threepence he'd saved, but he wouldn't take it.

Cats hated Appleton School, right from the day he started to the day he left; he had no interest in learning, he was the biggest dunce in the school, though when he did the things he wanted to do it was a different story. He had over two miles to walk (though being a child, he didn't just walk — he'd walk a bit, then run a bit, then have a look at something, then start walking again). The first week he went, the second he didn't — he went up to Appleton each day, but he just played about in a paddock till it was time to go home. The next week he made a mistake; he went past the school down to the post office store and Mr Champion, the teacher, saw him and sent two of the big boys to bring him back. But Cats wasn't going to be taken to school; he told them so, and fought and kicked till the storekeeper got sick of it and came out and said, 'I say, I say, leave the boy alone.' Cats said he'd go to school but he wouldn't be



taken, and when he got there Mr Champion showed him the stick but he never hit him — if he'd hit Cats that would have been the end of it, they'd never have got him to school again.

Mr Champion was strict, he was mad. He went to the Appleton Hotel at night and got blotto, and then had it out on the children next day. If they didn't know a thing he'd belt it into them; he used a stick or anything he could grab, and they remembered it for the rest of their lives.

Sometimes Cats was given threepence to buy his dinner and that was something marvellous, but he only bought biscuits from the store. The boys played fox and hounds and marbles and hopscotch and spun their tops, but there was a Kappler boy who was a bully and knocked the little boys about; he was cruel, and got hold of them and scruffed them up and did all sorts of things to them for no reason at all. But one Christmas, Bully Kappler went out shooting with his brother who accidentally shot him. News came home that he'd died and when Cats said it was the best thing that could have happened, his mother told him off. Cats was very pleased when Bully Kappler died.

And Cats went to the Congregational Sunday School (not every Sunday, but just when he got the bug), where Mr Wright read a page out of the Bible and explained what it meant, and then they'd put a penny in the bag and sing a hymn or two.

The first dead person Cats saw was his Grandmother Jones who'd come, with her black cat, Ninny, to live with them when she was sick. Cats saw her in her coffin and thought she was asleep. She had a big funeral; all Appleton went.

Granma and Granpa Currell were quiet, friendly people with no fuss about them, who didn't live in the Hills, but on the Adelaide plains at Gawler. A river ran through the town and on one side was the flour mill, on the other the Mill Inn that was Granpa's hotel, though he was a tee-totaller. Cats used to go there odd Christmases and stay for the summer holidays, and every day he went into the bar and got a bottle of lemonade with a glass marble stopper and had it to drink with his dinner. Uncle Arnold was a barman and kept his bicycle in the billiard room, and Cats taught himself to ride it — he'd hang on to the billiard table as he rode it round and round (if anybody came in to play billiards Cats would disappear). Uncle Walter was the wildest one of the family who'd been out bush and up to Queensland droving cattle; he had a suntan and a black and white kelpie dog that was his droving dog, as quiet as a mouse. Aunty Ethel was pretty with long hair. Aunty Ivy was ordinary and never had much to say; she'd lost the boyfriend she was going to marry in the

War — he was killed and she couldn't get over it, she'd never picked up with anybody else.

\* \* \*

The men were coming back to Appleton from the War when Cats left school. The workman who'd been his best friend at the Nursery came back all right — he reckoned he was immune and said they could've shot at him all day and they couldn't've hit him; but Dick Ricks came back with one arm and quite a few had been killed (when the Palmer boys died, it was the first case in the state of two brothers being killed at the Dardanelles). There was a big Roll of Honour on the Soldiers' Memorial in front of the Congregational Church.

Cats started work at the Nursery in the glass houses with his father. Everything was watered by hand, but in the cyclamen house, the little fern house and the little cold house you could put a hose on the tap. All the houses, except those three, were heated by hot-water pipes under the benches. The hot house was where the cuttings were struck; it was really hot in there, it was lovely in wintertime. In the summertime the glass houses had to be sprayed with lime water to stop the heat shining through; if there was a shower of rain the lime washed off and they'd have to be done over again. Cats would be in a glass house on a hot day, and as it was sprayed over he'd watch the glass turn white and then the temperature would drop about ten degrees.

Cats loved the Nursery but he didn't like working in the glass houses. It was too cissy, he thought — mucking round with plants and flowers and things; it wasn't what he wanted to do all his life. And he started sleeping outside on the verandah, where he could come and go and nobody knew; he'd steal old Mrs Brandon's pony and go for a ride at night up to the shop at Appleton or down to the shop at Tea Tree Gully. He wanted to be a blacksmith, and at last he stopped working at the Nursery to learn the trade with Bob Sweet, the Appleton blacksmith.

Bob Sweet was a little man, smaller than Cats. He was a good chap to work for and taught Cats to shoe horses. Cats had to pull the old shoe off for a start and then he trimmed the hoof up with the parers and smoothed it off with a rasp; then he made the shoe to fit the hoof — bent it just right, heated it up and knocked it into shape; then he put it on and drove the nails in and cut them off and then bent them so they lapped over and wouldn't pull out. Cats liked doing that.

Bob Sweet only rented the blacksmith's shop and when he had a tiff

with the owner he said that was it, he was leaving, and then Cats went with him to work at the jam factory where they had four teams of horses to take the jam to the city. But Bob Sweet was only there about nine months when he had a tiff with another chap over a job; he said he was leaving and went off and left Cats to carry on by himself.

Not long after that, the jam factory got a lorry that cut out two teams on the road and meant a dozen horses went. The next year they got another lorry and that cut all the teams out. The only horses left were a couple of ponies and the yard horses that carted the pulp from the factory down to the pulp shed. But then the electric power supply came to the factory, and they put electric motors on everything and got a third lorry, and Cats could see electric power was the thing. The jam factory sent him to the city to learn Fitting and Turning, Oxy-welding and Electrical Work at the School of Mines — he rode his motorbike down to the evening classes after work.

Cats' first girlfriend was Susie White, who wasn't a Hills girl, but came from the city to work as a maid in the big house at the Nursery. She was lively with fair hair, and Cats used to borrow his father's pony and trap and take her to the Chain of Ponds or the Appleton dance. The pianist would start playing and then the dance'd go; they did waltzes and two-steps and every old thing, but there was another boy that Susie badly wanted and she left Cats for him. It didn't last long — the other boy dumped her.

When Cats was twenty-four he was invited to Becky Stock's twenty-first birthday party; he'd known Becky at school, and her father had looked after the cows at the jam factory till one day he dropped dead half-way to work. Becky was a Methodist with blonde streaks in her hair, and Cats gave her a cut-glass dish and switched from the Congregational to the Methodist Church and started taking her home after evening service. They went together for six years. It was Depression time and Becky wasn't going to get married and Cats wasn't, either, because things were too uncertain.

But Cats was lucky, he was never out of work, and when times got better he bought a house at Appleton and Becky's three sisters were her bridesmaids in pink dresses. Cats and Becky didn't go for a honeymoon — they were married on a Saturday, and Monday was a holiday because it was Commemoration Day, and Cats went back to work at the factory on the Tuesday.

It was terrible when Brandon's Nursery was sold to a bloke who wanted a Jersey stud and wasn't interested in glass houses; Cats' father

begged him to keep them going but he wouldn't have it on, he just wrecked the place. And Cats' father died and then his mother, and Becky and Cats had two sons and a daughter and a cat called Fluffy that got run over on the road and then another one called Ginger that was run over, too, but he wasn't killed. Ginger struggled to the back door with his back sort of broken and Cats reckoned he was in a pretty bad way and the kindest thing would be to give him a bullet. After he shot him, he thought, That's it, I'm not having any more cats.

Cats was Maintenance at the jam factory for over forty years. He looked after the machinery till he retired, and then the day was never half long enough to do what he wanted to do in his garden; time really went with Cats. He had a shade house and glass frames that he painted with lime in summer, where he grew maidenhair ferns and a few daphnes; and he had hydrangeas, bronias, camellias and lots of the things they'd had at Brandon's Nursery; and he grew Daydream tomatoes, Green Feast peas, white spine cucumbers, carrots, onions and cherry rhubarb, strawberries, red currants, raspberries and boysenberries that were like a blackberry and very prickly and ran like fury.

At one time in Appleton, everything was brought to your door by the butcher, the baker, the grocer, the greengrocer; and there was a blacksmith, an undertaker, a carpenter, a hotel. The hotel closed first, and vandals got in and wrecked it so they pulled it down. Then they built a supermarket at Tea Tree Gully and one by one the Appleton shops went; the post office store was the last to go, and then you couldn't even buy a postage stamp. Once there'd been a great stretch of open paddocks between the Gully and the suburbs of the city; then the paddocks were built over with houses and the new people even came to live at Appleton — the place went mad. Lots of the old families died out or moved away. One time Cats knew everybody in his part of the Hills; suddenly he hardly knew his next door neighbour.

Cats' and Becky's daughter had to go to hospital to have an operation for gall stones, and their little granddaughter came up to Appleton to stay with them. Mrs Windle's cat from next door had kittens and their granddaughter brought one home. Becky thought they'd better not feed it or they'd never get rid of it, but Cats thought that was just cruel and said, 'It's a nice little kitten, it's got to be fed.' So he fed it and their granddaughter used to play with it, and dress it up, and put it to bed at night in a box and it'd still be there in the morning. Cats made friends with the kitten and called it Cuddles, and it stayed with them when their granddaughter went home. It'd jump up on Cats' knee and curl up and go to sleep — it must have thought Cats was a sucker.

Cats and Becky had a little grandson once, but he'd never walked, he'd never spoken: something had been wrong with his brain. He could smile and he could cry, but that was about all. He was never in any pain that Cats knew of; he was a lovely child, a happy sort of child; he was four years old when he died.

Over Cats' and Becky's bed hung the picture from Cats' old home that said LOOKING UNTO JESUS, but Cats didn't look unto Jesus. To him, He wasn't a kind gentleman; he thought He was the cruellest thing that ever was — Jesus or God or whatever you liked to call Him. Making little children suffer for no reason, whatever — Cats couldn't swallow that sort of thing, to him it didn't make sense. But he and Becky never had words about religion, even though she taught in the Sunday School and had every faith in the world (Cats always said she had enough faith for herself and him too). Neither of them worried about dying. They'd agreed that Cats would go first and Becky would be left to sell the place and go into a unit and that was that. But it didn't work out that way.

One Sunday morning Becky went to church and there was a meeting there in the afternoon, so she stopped on with the others and had lunch in the hall; then she came home with a plate of savoury stuff that she put in the fridge. Cats was sitting in the kitchen reading a book, and Becky said there was something on the TV she'd like to see. So she went into the sitting-room and watched it and then came back and asked Cats what he'd like for his tea. Cats said he didn't care what he had, and Becky said she didn't want anything, and Cats said he supposed she'd had a big feed up at the church. Becky went over to the fridge and opened the door and caught hold of the plate of savoury stuff, but when she turned to put it on the table it dropped out of her hand and she crashed to the floor. Cats jumped up and said, 'Mum, what are you doing to me?' But she was gone — she'd had a heart attack, her heart had just stopped, and she'd never had a heart attack before in her life. It was as quick as that, Cats couldn't do a thing. Just in one second his whole life changed.

Cuddles was the only thing Cats had to turn to when he lost Becky. If it hadn't been for Cuddles, Cats wouldn't have cared whether he came home or not at times. But he had to come home for the cat, he had to come home and see that he was all right.

He was quite a big cat. He was white round the face and underneath, and he had four white feet; his head was black, and he was a brindled gingery colour round the back and on the shoulders.

In a sort of way, Cuddles took Becky's place. He was a godsend, one of the good companions. Cats called him Beautiful and Lovely and Darling.

He fed him Cat Chow or liver — though too much liver wasn't a good thing (he'd started him off on mutton but Cuddles got so that he wouldn't touch it, he'd just sniff it and walk away). His hair grew pretty long, so Cats combed him and trimmed him up — cut round underneath and round his tail and round his neck — but he was a terror for cat balls; he'd get hold of himself and pull the hair out and if Cats didn't watch him, he'd swallow it. Cats gave Cuddles a teaspoon of liquid paraffin once a month and that helped him get rid of the cat balls.

Cuddles didn't roam very far as a rule, he usually kept one eye on Cats. He lived as much inside as he did out; he slept on Cats' bed. If Cats went to watch TV or read the paper, Cuddles jumped on his knee and curled up; when Cats started talking, the cat looked as if he was trying to answer. And in bed at night Cats spoke to Becky and they'd have a conversation, but then he'd put his hand out to touch her and she wouldn't be there.

'Cats Currell' is in Barbara Hanrahan's new collection of stories *Dream People* which will be published by Grafton Books in June, 1987. We would like to thank Barbara Hanrahan and the publishers for granting permission to publish 'Cats Currell' in *Kunapipi*.

# Daisy Miller Down Under: The Old World/New World Paradigm in Barbara Hanrahan

I also knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle... The chuckle was because womanlike my 'history' starts not with the taking of lands, or the births, battles and deaths of Great Men, but with one woman asking another for her underwear.

Alice Walker

I want my women to be strong legendary beings... I have to create my own world — a world that's a combination of the inner and the outer, the physical and the symbolic. A world that isn't merely 'today' but which is the past as well. To me the past is never dead.

Barbara Hanrahan

Barbara Hanrahan might well be considered to be to the Australian psyche what Nathaniel Hawthorne is to the American. Both are at times Gothic writers, given to explorations of the power of the imagination, the position of women and the effect of the Old World on the New World psyche. The historical impulse in Hanrahan's fiction has been made explicit in the epigraph to the most recently published novel *Annie Magdalene*:

For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it at all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie... All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded.<sup>1</sup>

Hanrahan has ever been concerned with the lives of women caught in the power struggles of history but lost from the official record.

While the realist works like *Kewpie Doll* (1984) and *Annie Magdalene* (1985) have been perhaps more obviously concerned to document the unsung lives of so-called ordinary women, the earlier Gothic novels —

*The Albatross Muff* (1978), *Where the Queens All Strayed* (1978), *The Peach Gardens* (1979), *The Frangipani Gardens* (1980) and *Dove* (1981) — are also informed by the historical impulse.<sup>2</sup> Interwoven with motifs of the official history of Australia they distil the essence of a particular epoch to form what might be called a psychic history of Australia. Far from being a de-contextualised literature of the fantastic,<sup>3</sup> Hanrahan's work derives its vitality from its exploration of inherited patterns of thought which cripple the present.

Just as Hawthorne repeatedly explores New England's past (informed by the conviction that the moral of New England is 'the deformity of any government that does not grow out of the nature of things and the character of its people'),<sup>4</sup> so Hanrahan continues to probe the Australian past, in particular the past of Adelaide, named after an English queen. She has replied somewhat testily to critics who suggest she should find somewhere else to write about, 'Nobody told William Faulkner to stop writing about the same set of characters in the deep South.'<sup>5</sup> It requires no stretch of the imagination to see parallels between Hawthorne's Salem and Hanrahan's Adelaide, which for all its civilized elegance has been the scene of bizarre and sinister events. Linking a sense of the sinister to the uneasy juxtaposition of Old World/New World elements Hanrahan herself says of Adelaide:

It's such a toy-like place. So pretty on the surface. One weirdness is the way you have Government House on the corner of the main street. You have big palm trees waving up and the Union Jack waving. That's the setting for something sinister in my mind.... It's the oddness of having a cathedral — the Englishness mixed up with the Australianness. And then you get a jungliness with the palm trees and everywhere you walk you see the purple hills enclosing you even more. And in the early summer morning there's a golden feeling all about you ... and it seems that nothing evil could exist in this place. But it does.... When all the animals got killed at the zoo what a strange and typically Adelaide thing that it was all the baby ones.<sup>6</sup>

The fiction of both writers is permeated with real historical figures, Governor Winthrop and Anne Hutcheson in *The Scarlet Letter*, the Duke and Duchess of York in *The Frangipani Gardens*, Dickens in *The Albatross Muff*. Like the narrator of *Kewpie Doll*, Hanrahan's characters are relentlessly drawn back 'to the legendary land across the sea that offered the only chance of returning'.<sup>7</sup> The Old World/New World motif is central.

The Gothic has always possessed an essential socio-political dimension. As David Punter writes in *The Literature of Terror*, Gothic fiction is engaged 'in a process of cultural self-analysis, and the images which it throws up are the dream-figures of a troubles social group'.<sup>8</sup> Gothic



writers, he points out, 'bring us up against the boundaries of the civilised', demonstrate 'the relative nature of ethical and behavioural codes and place over against the conventional world a different sphere in which these codes ... operate only in distorted forms' (p. 404). The Gothic foreground areas of socio-psychological life which are suppressed in the interest of social and psychological equilibrium, in particular the relations between the sexes. Punter also notes the obsession of American Gothic writers with the European past:

In Brown, Hawthorne and Poe, evil has in one sense or another to do with the European: Brown's villains generally come out of the Old World; the guilt which haunts Hawthorne's characters is associated with infection by European intolerance; Poe creates an artificial version of a European environment in which to set his tales. Europe stands in all three cases as a weighty imperiment in the path of progress. (p. 211)

Similarly Leslie Fiedler notes that if man was troubled by the ruins of a decaying past and dreamed of supernatural enemies lurking in their shadows,

it was because he suspected that the past, even dead, especially dead, could continue to work harm. Even as late as Henry James, an American writer deeply influenced by Gothic modes was able to imagine the malaria, the miasma which arises from decaying ruins, striking down Daisy Miller as she romantically stands at midnight in the Coliseum.<sup>4</sup>

The Gothic mode has proved useful to writers exploring the Old World/New World paradigm; it is, in Rosemary Jackson's words, a mode which narrates 'epistemological confusion': 'The subject is no longer confident about appropriating or perceiving a material world',<sup>10</sup> — a confusion exacerbated in fiction in which the subject is confronted with a world that is foreign and other. Undermining concepts of what is real (p. 175) the Gothic aims at 'dissolution of an order experienced as oppressive and insufficient' (pp. 176, 122). Moreover, the Gothic has a subversive function in attempting to depict a reversal of the subject's cultural formation (p. 177) — 'attempting to dissolve the symbolic order at its very base, where it is established in and through the subject where the dominant signifying system is reproduced' (p. 178). Jackson writes of Dracula, and vampire myth in general, that it is 'a re-enactment of that killing of the primal father who has kept all the women to himself' and 'in relation to the theories of Lacan ... it could be claimed that the act of vampirism is the most violent and extreme attempt to negate, or reverse, the subject's insertion into the symbolic' (p. 120). The Gothic is particu-

larly appropriate, then, in the exploration of Old World patriarchal cultures imposed on New Worlds.<sup>11</sup>

In its exploration of cultural myths *The Albatross Muff* is a classic of Australian fiction, comparable to *The Scarlet Letter* in American fiction. Both novels explore the violation of a new world by forced liaison with an old, corrupt and unnatural order. The albatross muff becomes an emblem like the scarlet letter of the arbitrary nature of man made law in its attempts to govern natural law. Hanrahan's Stella, like Hawthorne's Pearl, is the girl child co-extensive with a continent; both are associated with the vital energies of the new world from which they come — Pearl is at home in the wild heathen nature of the forest and Stella in the land of tall grey trees and silence. Even as Pearl becomes a living hieroglyphic of the scarlet letter, so young Stella becomes associated with the albatross muff, the unnatural artifact created by the slaying of that great white bird of the southern waters; a sexual resonance exists in both. Stella like Pearl is a father-haunted child. When her father dies in a riding accident in Australia, Stella and her family return to the father-dominated society of Victorian England. Here all the possibilities of the continent with which she is associated are appropriated by an Old World father; like Pearl she is reclaimed for the patriarchal world by the agency of a father's kiss — rather more than a kiss in this instance:

He had strong arms and he put them round her. He smelled of cigars and cherry laurel water. Papa, in the old land, had smelled the same. Maybe it was him; maybe she was down the tunnel, across the sea — there, where she wanted to be at last... Stella felt the same age as Baby had been made forever by death. She felt irresponsible, redeemed. She was his child; he was her papa.

His liking took her body away from her; made it more his than hers... He did things to her.<sup>12</sup>

Stella, like Pearl, is absorbed into 'the world's artificial system' and henceforth subject to 'the interpolations of the perverted mind and heart of man'.<sup>13</sup> The violation of Stella becomes an emblem of the violation of the New World. Even as Pearl is young America, so Stella is young Australia; the dishonouring of the child is an emblem of the dishonouring of the promise of the continent.<sup>14</sup>

However, in *The Albatross Muff*, Hanrahan's exploration of the Old World/New World paradigm takes place in the Old World; and in this encounter between an Old World male and a New World female there are analogues with James's *Daisy Miller*. When Daisy Miller visits the old world she is ostracised by the American cabal in Rome, who have assumed old world behavioural codes more rigidly than the indigines, a

mark of their own disorientation and desperate need to adapt. Excluded, bewildered and defiant Daisy flaunts these codes and dies from a contamination contracted in the Coliseum; in a sense she is a sacrifice to the older civilisation, the conflict between Old and New Worlds.

Hanrahan's Stella provides a striking parallel. Stella is a colonial child, the first of Hanrahan's 'antipodean angel-children', who dies of contact with the old world, in particular a victim of its sexual politics. Stella returns to that mythical land beyond the sea still regarded as 'home' by her family. She arrives in England 'dressed like a rosella parrot' where she is inevitably perceived as other: 'Everywhere she is, people die... They reckon she puts on spells. Sort of the Evil Eye. She comes all the way from Australia, they say. Foreign parts where it is too hot for a proper human. I wouldn't be surprised if a bit of convict hadn't got in. There's something funny about her' (p. 171). Marginalised in England and cut off from her roots in Australia Stella is vulnerable to contamination: first Mr Backhouse, then Sir William Hall. Like the albatross Stella is easy prey when out of her element; the albatross, while powerful and at ease in its own element, appears clumsy and stupid on land, hence the name molly mawk or stupid gull. Ultimately, like Daisy Miller she dies of contact with the old world, a contact much more graphically sexual in Hanrahan than in James. 'He hated her and determined to nail her harder than ever tonight. She deserved it, she revolted him ... the shadows under the arms of her dress looked like evidence of some nigger variety of sweat' (p. 178). Foreign and other, like the continent with which she is associated, Stella is perceived as fallen and ripe for colonisation, even as Australia because of the terms of settlement coupled with her age and seasonal differences has seemed curiously uninnocent to European eyes, a preternaturally old young land.

It is important to remember that the novel is set in the 1850s when Australia was in the process of a radical democratisation that offered implicitly a challenge to the rigid class structure, poverty and polarised sexual relations in Victorian England. Stella and her family live on a sheep station near Goulborn N.S.W. where 'the sky was a brilliant blue... It was summer and everything seemed as it should be' (p. 76) — N.S.W. was 'the mother colony' and Goulbourn the last town in the British Empire to become a city by virtue of the royal letters patent creating a bishopric. However, after the death of her father, Stella, her mother, baby sister and nurse Moak ('Moak had been a convict, but good behaviour had turned her into an emancipist') return to England — the land of Queen Victoria, Princess Vicki, Mr Dickens (who visits Percy Villas), the Chartist Riots, the Great Exhibition, the Crystal Fountain,

the Turkish and Crimean Wars. But above all England is Cut Throat Lane, the Other Nation and an empire drinking the blood of its women. 'Although these people were out in the street, they weren't free. Fresh air didn't enhance their complexions. Their eyes were rheumy, their skin had a tinge of blue, the holes in their clothes weren't slashed for decoration. They were ugly and foreign looking... They were English people...' (p. 111). It is a novel in which the persons introduced bear the features not of individuals but of the class or race to which they belong: Stella, the colonial child; Moak, the Irish convict; Sir William Hall, English patriarch, radical in all but sexual relations. Just as the relation between Hester and Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* is an emblem of the unnaturalness of the liaison between the new land and old order ('Mine, was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay'),<sup>15</sup> so is the relationship between Stella, from the land of tall grey trees and silence, and Sir William Hall, Kinderschander ('child-profaner') of Victorian England. In England Stella is appropriated by Sir William Hall of Percy Villas — the maleness of his domain could hardly be more pointedly signified.

Western society as portrayed in Hanrahan's Gothic fiction is a society that has internalised what Jungian social theorist Linda Leonard refers to as the sick side of the masculine: 'In the psyche of the puella dwells a sick manifestation of the rigid authoritarian side of the masculine, the image of a perverted and sadistic old man who threatens the young girl.' He is the image of the sick society; on the cultural level signifying that the female qualities are threatened by the male. 'The puella must deal with the perverted old man within who hacks away at her potential before she is able to create and actualize her achievements in the world.'<sup>16</sup> The motif of the young girl menaced by the sinister old man who is inevitably from the Old World recurs in Hanrahan's fiction.

In *The Frangipani Gardens* Charlie Roche — 'a thorough English man, but delicate, he might be a Tennyson' — visits Australia where he becomes obsessed with an Australian girl child:

She was perfect, with her ringlets and snowy pinafore.... She was the purest thing in the world, and she strayed into his dreaming ... a baby doll: bisque head with go-to-sleep eyes and April smile with two little teeth; finely formed imitation kid body stuffed very plump ... 'Easily undressed' ... 'Patent indestructible dolly, cannot be broken by the rough usage to which a doll is usually subjected.'<sup>17</sup>

In the same novel Girlie O'Brien is maimed by her own father: 'The reward of Papa's tyrant arms about her had set her off playing little girl for life' (p. 17). Young Lou is troubled by dreams of molestation:

'Little girl,' he said, his voice wobbly with love, his eyes, savaging her body. 'Pretty pussy,' he said, wheedling, and he was the dirty old man who offered the young girl two shillings to go up the lane, and increased it to four when she refused. But he was an academic with a look of scholarly benevolence, he read and read. (p. 43)

In *The Peach Groves* Mr Maufe, who was related to Lord Fermoy and knew the nephew of the Earl of Annersley intimately, is literally a child molester: 'Papa was acquainted with Sir George Gray, so when a certain tot turned nasty in Hyde Park and made it imperative he should speed abroad New Zealand seemed the obvious choice.'<sup>18</sup> However, even in exile he knows a certain little door: 'Amy's lips were sealing-wax red and just as sticky; Eileen might have come straight from the convent with her forelock tied up with baby ribbon, and all those scapulas safety-pinned to her chemise' (p. 49). The antipodean angel child Maud becomes his prey and not until Mr Maufe is thwarted in his possession of Maud (and Maud's mother has relinquished her incestuous relationship with her brother) are Maud and her family freed of the last vestiges of the Old World.<sup>19</sup>

In *The Albatross Muff* the violation of Australia by the Old World is rendered in the relationship between Stella and Sir William Hall. Throughout the novel Stella is associated with Australia, England is 'Home for Mama, but not Stella. Her home was still the one by the river, though she knew she had left it forever.' While 'England pretended to be home', home was 'that land of tall grey trees and silence' (p. 58).

Stella wished they had never come to England. It had been better when they were in New South Wales, and Mama was cursing the heat, and the way her best muslin was stained at the armpits. (p. 70)

She wanted to return to where she'd come from; get across the sea, go down a deep hole — come out in that dreamland she'd left; be only a little girl again. (p. 131)

She is terrified of England and its legacy to her:

She felt as if she might have died already.... She felt as if her skin should be shrivelled and wrinkled and a thousand years old.... For 1861 wasn't safe.... Maybe when today — 1861 — was written down, it would seem as safe and done-with as then: all the sharp colours bleached to a soft dull sepia, all the people — street people like Moak and proper people like Mr Hall — reduced to mere cyphers by words like Society and Class. (p. 132)

Indeed much of Stella's guilt and hallucination in the novel stem not from madness but from the exposure of the colonial child to the hideous poverty and social injustice of Victorian England where the family drama

of Percy Villas may be played out in elegant if tragic comfort while Moak and Tom are freezing, debased wretches only streets away. It is through Stella and Moak that young Edith Hall discovers 'a nightmare other England':

Her London, so far, had been ... an oasis of green parks where events of national import were festively celebrated with fireworks ... the phantoms were left for Stella to account for. Edith knew it to have been a mistake the day she'd seen the crossing sweeper who was only a scarecrow bundle of rags ... and that horrid man crawling on his knees, selling nutmeg-graters — oh yes, he was a mistake, too: someone crawled out of Mr Dickens's Tom-all-Alone's (and everyone knew that was only fiction) ... And then she rounded the corner, and then it was another world.... While the well-groomed family history of Percy Villas was being played out, there'd also been climbing-boys covered in soot, and Mary Ann the match-box maker who'd never heard of England, and thought a violet a pretty bird. (pp. 196-7)

In England, cut off from her origins, Stella finds herself 'being made like part of a legend; hate the legend sweeping me on into a life I don't want to live' (p. 115); in short she is assimilated into the symbolic order, the gender roles determined by Victorian society. She becomes a character in a culturally inscribed legend (there is more than a hint of Lacan in Stella's inscription into patriarchal myth): 'She was an orphan-heiress.... Even the hyphen, though it might convert the two situations into a tidy single, couldn't make the role — orphan-heiress — easier to play' (p. 107). It is a deadly legend. Hanrahan's London is an aggressively masculine world which is lethal to women. Male tyranny in the family is not essentially separable from male tyranny in the society at large, in Virginia Woolf's words, 'the public and private worlds are inseparably connected ... the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other'.<sup>17</sup> Stella's mother is set upon by street roughs in Cut Throat Lane and 'knocked so hard on the head that she subsequently died' (p. 104); Edith's mother has 'turned into something like an Egyptian mummy' (p. 163) — 'touching her would be like touching the clammy underside of a piece of Windsor soap' (p. 119). This legend prescribes a similar fate for Stella and when she succeeds Pensa as the second Mrs William Hall, she realizes their fatal affinity: 'In the night Pensa pressed her wet, invisible mouth on Stella's, till she woke up, choking. She curled invisibly twin-like about Stella's body, icing the air with her breath' (p. 183).

In the vision of the novel the patriarchal legacy of Victorian England is the particular cultural straitjacket encumbering Australia. The well groomed family history being played out at Percy Villas proves to be the suppurating sore infecting the nation and its empire. The violation of

Stella by Mr Hall represents the corruption of new world innocence by old world license. Sir William Hall is presented as the quintessential English gentleman, as Victorian Patriarch.

For Papa was liberal. He cared; he hoped for a better day to come. He read Mrs Stowe's *Uncle Tom* and cried.... It couldn't be denied that Dissy's papa had a side that was decidedly radical. But his radicalism had well-defined limits. Where the fair sex was concerned it quicksilver turned romantic. And that meant that to be Papa's daughter and a proper girl, you should live out each day demurely, blinkered by down-cast eyelashes and the shadow of purity's invisible crush of lilies.... You limited your step under your crinoline à la Eugenie; you let Mama devour your time, boa-constrictor like, with weak health and notes to be written and visiting cards to be left. (p. 86)

Though one side of Sir William Hall is 'the proper English gentleman who jingled money in his pocket, and made you know heaven and gentle Jesus was true', the other is the perverted old man who menaces the puella. He had first seen his wife Pensa when she was an infant:

What had started as a love match, so perfectly romantic — she, a tiny-tot crowing at him from a hearth rug ... then a moppet who nightly lisped his name into her prayers, then a pretty maiden with a blush ... had degenerated into a sick room union that couldn't produce an heir. And, like Edith, Pensa didn't have the grace to die. She lingered on, a limp rag dolly on her couch. (pp. 86-87)

In relation to the national theme, Moak, the convict turned emancipist, is closely allied with Stella and with Australia. She is a repository of folk wisdom: 'Moak knew things that other people didn't.... Moak knew magic' (p. 8). 'Moak was better than Mama. She was big and had a man's smell. Her skin was brown as a gipsy's. Moak was a dark lady; though she wasn't a lady, according to Mama's standards, and wasn't as dark as the blackfellows back home' (p. 13). And Moak smells of Australia: 'Stella sniffed up her smell. Doing that, she was safe among the old bush things: the gum-tree that had pinkish bark in the spring, the Wedding bush by the verandah ... finger flower, love flower ... Pricky Moses wattle.... There was Moak to make things safe' (p. 24). On the voyage to England it is Moak who warns of the danger of killing the albatross. However, once in England, Moak is no longer the berry brown Gypsy Queen; she is an outcast, a beggar, a fallen woman: 'Then something terrible happened. Moak was one minute Nurse, dishing out stewed rhubarb for nursery tea, the next she was a fallen woman' (p.66). Moak reassures her 'No one can really part us ... I was in the bush with you' (p. 67). The next time Stella sees Moak, 'she was ragged, her clothes were all to ribbons. She was ugly, like a beggar. The street was

where she belonged, with the crossing sweeper and the ragamuffins who turned somersaults for a penny' (p. 78).

Stella is haunted by this transformation. At those times when Stella, exhausted by the split between the Old World and the New, only longs for oblivion and is about to be assimilated into the female-annihilating world of Victorian England, Moak appears as a menacing figure, reminding her of her origins. Much as Stella attempts to forget Moak ('And being Mrs William Hall would take her even further away from Moak; from the old things...'), she cannot: 'The voices were back again ... Moak resumed accusing. She had come to Percy Villas in person. Moak had tracked her down' (pp.181-2).

Moak in England expresses the resentment of 'the other nation', whilst in Australia she was an emancipist and a member of the class and race said to have fostered the growth of Australian democracy and nationalism. The figure of Moak, convict emancipist and gipsy matriarch, becomes the arch antagonist of Sir William Hall, English patriarch and kinderschander. Though Stella reasons that 'Snakestone and mandrake root had no power over Mr Hall; a hare's foot carried in the pocket was rendered ridiculous by his well-heeled gentleman's logic' (p. 81), it is Moak who triumphs over Sir William Hall and reclaims the antipodean child. In a burst of energy associated throughout the novel with Australia, Moak rises from her wretchedness in Cut Throat Lane, assumes her former magic, smashes Sir William's skull, and sets fire to Percy Villas:

For Moak was still so much possessed by magic, that anything might be true.... Moak was someone out of legend, spirited to Percy Villas from some storm-wracked headland, some bushland eerie. Queer and brown and foreign, hate — or was it love? had made her strong. In her arms she held Stella.... 'You killed her,' she cried.... Moak's forehead reared higher; her hair whirled round her face in goffered frills. Moak's voice ... spoke of seals being broken and vials pouring forth; of the star, Wormwood, which fell from Heaven; of the Beast whose number is six hundred three score and six. Papa kept coming forward. Now Stella was all that kept them apart. They fought for her. Their hands grappled. She hung between them like a broken white bird. Edith remembered the albatross killed on the voyage round the Horn. Mrs Edenbrough's muff had been pretty. But not this. Not Stella's dead head flaying, and her body taking their blows. (pp. 203-4)

It is an apocalyptic conflagration which destroys Percy Villas, the primary symbol in the novel of male authority. Moak's burning of the house is a symbolic gesture, an attempt to eliminate the sexual/social oppression that radiates out from the private home into the public domain. It is an expression of class hatred and an attempt to rescue the antipodean



child from her bitter heritage. Here the symbolism linking Stella to the albatross/Australia symbolism is made explicit.

In the end Stella had gone back to her beginnings. Tossing in a bed in cold England, she had vaulted the miles of sea that separated her from the land she'd seemingly lost — a land where it was summer rather than winter... That world was real, not this ... now, mingled with sea smells, the scent of wattle and eucalyptus was strong. Nothing mattered but this little last bit of journey... Laurel and wedding bush. Throught he willows, the river rushing... Once Moak had been a gipsy queen. She was like that again. (pp. 199-201)

The Old World/New World paradigm, and the unwitting quest for origins, occur in the other Gothic novels as well. *Where the Queens All Strayed* chronicles the decline of 'one of the grandest houses in the hills': 'the house that, as Violet Bank, had offered hospitality to Royalty now sheltered a variety of misfortune'.<sup>21</sup> *The Frangipani Gardens* chronicles the demise of the O'Brien clan, descendants of an ancient race of kings, against the backdrop of the Royal Visit of 1927 when the Duke and Duchess of York visited Australia to open the first Parliament. *The Peach Groves* follows the uneasy transformation of Betsy Jones of Liverpool, England, into Blanche Dean of Glenelg, South Australia, and her brother Harry Jones into Major Jones who lived at Epsom where the volcanic soil was choice, who raced Wapiti and Nelson, and moved among the élite of Auckland. Their sporadic incestuous relation is a measure of their inability to break from the Old World and assimilate to the New. Only when Harry discovers his antipodean God in the aloneness of the Gum-fields and brother and sister renounce their liaison is the past 'finally wiped out' (p. 91). Tempe, half Maori, half European ('Tane and mother were muddled in Tempe's head with Alfred Lord T. and the Lady of Shallot.... Tempe was two people really' (pp. 199-200)) is destroyed by the split. In *Dove Arden Valley* ('like the domains and gardens of some splendid estate in the best part of Europe ... set down in tact among the gum trees') is contrasted to the great wheat fields of the Mallee.<sup>22</sup> However, even the people of the Mallee who 'with axe and slasher, scrub roller and stump jump plough' have 'created a landscape' (p. 77) remain 'proudly, so pitifully English ... hedged by an antipodean jungle of stiff splintered branches, the mysterious pearly-grey bloom. The wheat fields only spread so far; the untamed Mallee country seemed endless' (p. 81). The Old World/New World paradigm is played out in the lives of Dove and her sisters.

In Hanrahan's tales exploring the Old World/New World motif, there are intimations of other possibilities of social order; in particular the

energies of woman and the power of female bonding are seen as challenge and possible alternative to patriarchal structures. Often this potential is imaged in lesbian relationships in such a way as to evoke Monique Wittig's concept of the lesbian as occupying the only socio-sexual position outside the man/woman dyad: 'Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (man and woman), because the designated subject is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.'<sup>23</sup> A number of Hanrahan's women occupy a position of marginality which suggests 'a difference no longer conceived of as an inverted image or as a double, but as alterity, multiplicity, heterogeneity', a position 'posited not within the norms but against and outside the norms'.<sup>24</sup>

In *The Albatross Muff* there are alternative worlds to that of Percy Villas. Firstly there is Australia itself which exists primarily in the imaginations of Stella and Edith as the antipodean dream land which offers an antidote to the deathly society of Victorian England. Australia is also the place where one like Moak possessing 'the freedom of a broken law' (Hester's situation in *The Scarlet Letter*) can provide an alternative model to that of Stella or Edith's mothers; possessing natural wisdom she is able in Australia to 'walk like a man' and nurture and comfort Stella.<sup>25</sup>

In striking contrast to the male world of London, is Emma's cottage in Wales, Bryntiron. Like the world of Sarah Orne Jewett's pastoral fiction it is a world without men in which the women live quietly at peace with their surroundings, gathering herbs and tending vegetables; these idyllic sections of the book have a mythic quality in which the women seem to be participating in primordial time.<sup>26</sup> In Wales, Edith/Dissy is 'brave as a boy, who didn't flinch when Cousin Emma cut the thorn from her finger, who carried Stella all the way home when she twisted her ankle'. She is handsome — 'a girl who was a boy, with her long stride and tanned face'. In Wales they vow to 'live a lovely life that was nothing to do with needle-work and pinned-up hair and boots that pinched' (pp. 74-5). However their plans are interrupted by Edith's Papa.

While Stella is drawn back into the male world of London, the promise of Australia and Bryntiron lives on in the imagination of Edith. Through her love of Stella, Edith apprehends a different future; rejecting the cultural script that destroyed Stella, she learns to cherish her 'spinster' ambitions; in the antipodean child and in Australia she finds her story, a story that might ensure Stella's daughter a different heritage.<sup>27</sup> This vision frees her from the patriarchal structures that destroyed her friend (see pp. 190-3) and by the end of the novel Edith is transformed into the image of the spinster that Nina Auerbach discusses in *Woman and the*

*Demon* — the free, untrammelled, buoyant voyaging consciousness associated with immigration to the new world and prophetic of new social orders. She is a being threatening to the family and the patriarchal social order, because like the fallen woman (shades of Moak) she exists beyond women's traditional identities as daughter, wife and mother; she is 'a preternaturally endowed creature who taunts conventional morality and seeks the glory of her own apotheosis'.<sup>28</sup>

The threat of 'woman' and the power of female bonding to the symbolic order is another motif shared by Hanrahan and Hawthorne. Throughout his fiction Hawthorne perceives 'awakened and not conventionally invested female sexual power as a source and type of individualistic nullification of social restraint'.<sup>29</sup> 'A female reformer, in her attacks upon society, has an instinctive sense of where the life lies, and is inclined to aim directly at that spot. Especially, the relation between the sexes is naturally among the earliest to attract her notice.'<sup>30</sup> Whether the 'witches' in the new world forest or the young girls dancing around the maypole, Hawthorne senses in these communities of women a threatening alternative to patriarchal order, as well as the possibility of a social order more in harmony with nature:

Girls are incomparably wilder and more effervescent than boys, more untameable, and regardless of rule and limit, with an ever shifting variety, breaking continually into new modes of fun, yet with a harmonious propriety through all. Their steps, their voices, appear free as the wind, but keep consonance with a strain of music, inaudible to us. Young men and boys, on the other hand, play according to recognized law, old, traditionary games, permitting no caprioles of fancy, but with scope enough for the outbreak of savage instincts. For, young or old, in play or in earnest, man is prone to be a brute. (p. 68)

While there are problematics in idealizing the power of female bonding in Hanrahan's fiction, it does provide an alternative and challenge to patriarchal order, a way of defeating and escaping the power of the masculine, variously inscribed in the novels as robber bridegroom, greedy monarch, perverted old man or rapist father.

In *Where the Queens All Strayed* the female energies that have been excluded and repressed erupt; the fairy tale princess rejects the fairy tale ending, the prince's hand in marriage. Throughout the novel Thea's beautiful sister Meg has been cast in the role of princess; the aim is to turn her into 'a proper person', 'a feminine girl, cheerful' (p. 146): 'A Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Society was formed to be twin to the Men's. A discussion took place in the Institute Hall on «Were ladies more courteous fifty years ago than at present?» But Meg didn't go ...

Meg concentrated on rites of her own' (p. 135). With her fiancé the butcher who 'chopped up animals in an apron stained with blood' Meg is but 'a walking talking doll. Nodding her head in the right places; smiling into the mirror; only coming to life as she climbed the stairs to Rina's room' (p. 156). Ultimately, this fairy tale princess elopes with her lesbian lover, choosing to die in rebellion against the role socially and politically prescribed for her. Meg's union with Rina — Hanrahan's Mistress Hibbins figure associated with the energies of the forest — is a liberation however desperate from patriarchal myth. Like Miss de Mole, Meg had 'escaped as well, from a robber bridegroom and a sleeping beauty's couch' (p. 171).

They found her by the creek. She lay beside Rina beneath a lemon-tree twined with creeper. Meg and Rina lay together in a leafy room. The world outside was shut away. Under the tree it was cool and shady. The grass there was green; in other places it was bleached by the sun.... She had rustled away. Perhaps God whispered in her heart and revealed that Rina needed her.... They joined hands and ran through the roses and took the path to the creek.... It was a little green room. They had held hands and Meg laughed because it was good.... Rina had green fingers; she knew about plants.... Meg and Rina died ... Meg and Rina were girl friends who ate wild lilies for a joke. (pp. 175-6)

Meg had been something they could never live up to; their efforts to make her over into one of themselves had led to that morning by the creek. (p. 178)

Meg's choice is constructed as heroic within the text. Her sister Thea despising the banal conventionality of her family has dreamed of explorers — 'Explorers weren't ordinary.... They left the banquet at Government House and marched into the wilderness with silken Union Jacks.' However, when she sees Meg dead by the creek with Rina, she realizes that 'Meg was an explorer. She was somewhere with Burke and Wills and all the others who'd braved the interior' (p. 174). Thea is freed by Meg's choice to cherish her 'spinster ambitions' — to go to the new high school in the city like Hilda Nutter, who 'wasn't scared to go anywhere that would be strange. She cared so much for learning she'd never be lonely' (pp. 68-9). And so Rina, lesbian 'witch' associated with the forest, and Hilda Nutter, the learned spinster, became alternative role models for Thea. Both represent ways out of the dominant social order (even as Miss de Mole escapes the stereotype of 'plain English rose' by her heroic invalidism).<sup>31</sup>

In conclusion, in their Gothic novels Hanrahan and Hawthorne convey the sense that the new world is crippled by its acceptance of old world patriarchal structures; both explore forces that have been excluded

from the dominant order, in particular the energies of woman and the power of female bonding; both employ the Gothic mode to explore the Old World/New World paradigm.

I would like to end by invoking Claire Kahane's work on the Gothic. Kahane focuses on the configuration of the dead or displaced mother — rather than the motif of incest within an Oedipal plot — as a virtually ignored by defining characteristic of the Gothic: 'What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic ... is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine [and her society] must confront.'<sup>32</sup> The Gothic fear turns out to be 'the fear of femaleness itself, perceived as threatening to one's wholeness, obliterating the very boundaries of the self and of the social order' (p. 347). In *The Albatross Muff* the most powerful image is that of the mother Pensa Hall drinking bowls of blood, her lips rimmed with sinister blackness (p. 136).

She went even further away from pretty Pensa, then, as she licked her lips with pleasure and swallowed that sinister blackness, ringed round the edge with red. It looked blacker, redder in its thick white bowl.... Mama drank blood because her lungs had turned delicate. True: Mama spat other blood that wasn't sinister black, but frothy and brightly scarlet.... Papa had no more use for her; she could only produce babies that died.... What use had papa of girls.... Mama had been a girl too once, who had been Pensa. Now, however, it was 1862, not 1824, when Pensa had sucked a table-spoon on a hearth rug and Papa had first sighted her.... In the end it was Papa who killed her. It was his voice saying the words: «Dead... Dead...» over and over again. (pp. 160-2)

Blood, as Kristeva writes in *Powers of Horror*, is a 'fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality, all come together'.<sup>34</sup> Blood, the threat of pollution — which represents for Kristeva the missing discourse of the mother — is a threat to identity and the concept of difference which underlies the dominant social order. As Kristeva writes: 'The power of pollution ... transposes, on the symbolic level, the permanent conflict resulting from an unsettled separation between masculine and feminine power at the level of social institutions. *Non-separation would threaten the whole society with disintegration*' (p. 78; my italics).

These are among the powerful issues evoked in Barbara Hanrahan's Gothic fiction. The exploration of the relation of Old World cultures to New Worlds is, of course, a critical context in which to examine these very issues at the base of the 'civilising' process — a process which has

depended on the polarisation of male and female, and in patriarchal structures, on the annihilation of the female and the institutionalisation of a rigid masculinity.<sup>35</sup>

## NOTES

1. Barbara Hanrahan, *Annie Magdalene* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985). All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
2. *The Albatross Muff* is set in the 1850s, a time of radical democratisation, the Eureka Stockade, the growth of Australian nationalism, the achievement of self-governance by the states, conflicts between the squatters and the big landowners; *The Peach Groves* in the 1880s when Australia was seeking self-government; the six colonies in Australia and one in New Zealand had a parental relationship with England; Henry Parkes, the father figure of Federation, wanted New Zealand to come in with Australia. *Where the Queens All Strayed* is set in 1907 when, with Federation achieved, the country was searching for a site for a national capital; not in any way severed emotionally or psychically from England, it was about to be launched into the traumas of World War I. *The Frangipani Gardens* is set during the Royal Visit of 1927 when the Duke and Duchess of York visited Australia to open the First Parliament in Canberra. *Dove* spans three generations from the 1880s through the great depression; the struggles of the suffragettes, World War I, the great drought in the Mallee in 1914 provide the backdrop for the narrative. *Kewpie Doll* is set in the 1940s and 1950s while *Annie Magdalene* opens with the arrival of Annie's family in Australia in 1908 and traces her life through World War I, the flu epidemic of 1919, the royal visit of 1927, the depression, World War II.
3. See, for instance, Diana Brydon, 'Barbara Hanrahan's Fantastic Fiction', *Westerly*, No 3 (September 1982), pp. 41-9.
4. Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The Gray Champion' in *Hawthorne: Selected Tales and Sketches* edited by Hyatt Waggoner (New York: Rinehart, 1970), p. 144.
5. Barbara Hanrahan, cited by John Stevens, 'An Author Who Finds Little Joy in Her Task of Writing', *The Age*, 15 June 1985.
6. Barbara Hanrahan, op. cit.
7. Barbara Hanrahan, *Kewpie Doll* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p. 145. In *Kewpie Doll*, the narrator refers to Hawthorne in relation to her mother's history/past: 'My mother's story was over, the old legends were fixed ... the time when she drew the pansy at school; *The Scarlet Letter*. ... All my mother's past was in her voice and telling, she made it mine.... A past she didn't tell to anyone but me' (p. 128).
8. David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day* (London: Longman, 1980), p. 425. All further references are included in the text.
9. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Dell, 1966), p. 131.
10. Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 97. All further references are included in the text.
11. In the context of the relationship between old worlds and new, Sneja Gunew writes of the migrant as a child: 'This child is required to renegotiate an entry into the

- symbolic — needs to go once more through a form of the mirror stage, in which a putative subject is reflected by the gaze of the new host culture, and is quite other to any previous unified subject.' ('Distinguishing the Textual Politics of the Marginal Voice', *Southern Review*, Vol. 18, No 2 (July 1985), p. 145.
12. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Albatross Muff* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986), pp. 135, 175. All further references are included in the text.
  13. Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The New Adam and Eve', in *The Complete Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 327.
  14. See for instance Clark Griffiths, 'Pearl's Green A: «The Scarlet Letter» and American History', *The Australasian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. II, No 1 (July 1983), pp. 21-34.
  15. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Signet, 1959), p. 79.
  16. Linda Schierse Leonard, *The Wounded Woman: Healing the Father-Daughter Relationship* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1982), pp. 87-9.
  17. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Frangipani Gardens* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980), pp. 161-2. All further references are included in the text.
  18. Barbara Hanrahan, *The Peach Groves* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1979), p. 65. All further references are included in the text.
  19. While *Dove* marks a transition from Hanrahan's Gothic period, there are traces of the pattern; Dove is the child of a convict and an Australian girl and Valentine Arden, the offspring of the illegitimate union of a compliant girl from the valley and Prince Albert Victor.
  20. Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 162.
  21. Barbara Hanrahan, *Where the Queens All Strayed* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 83. All further references are included in the text.
  22. Barbara Hanrahan, *Dove* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982), pp. 15-16. All further references are included in the text.
  23. Monique Wittig quoted in Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Inscribing Femininity: French Theories of the Feminine', in *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 90-91.
  24. Josette Feral, 'The Powers of Difference', in *The Future of Difference* edited by Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1980), p. 91.
  25. In Hawthorne's novel Hester's situation is described as follows: 'For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free.' (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (New York: Signet, 1959), p. 190). Similarly in *Dove* Issy Thorn in the Mallee had 'got free': 'Now she was shameless: she dressed like a man. She wore the same dungarees and faded work-shirt as her father; she was as sunburned as a savage — her cheeks were brick red. But she looked tall and healthy and energetic.' (p. 75)
  26. See pp. 72-75, 187-193, for the Welsh interlude.
  27. Australia has the same impact on Edith's imagination as it does on Miss Peabody's in Elizabeth Jolley's novel; Miss Peabody's inheritance is also the imagination awakened by Australia, an exotic land where gender conventions might be overturned. (See my essay 'The Nights Belong to Elizabeth Jolley: Modernism and the Sappho-Erotic Imagination of *Miss Peabody's Inheritance*', *Meanjin*, Vol. 43, No 4 (December 1984), pp. 484-93.)

28. Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 109-49, 153, 185.
29. Michael Colacurcio, 'Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of *The Scarlet Letter*, *ELH*, Vol. 39 (1972), p. 474.
30. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, A Norton Critical Edition, edited by Seymour Gross and Rosalie Murphy (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 41. All further references are included in the text.
31. The figures of Tempe in *The Peach Groves* and Girlie in *The Frangipani Gardens* are more ambiguous. Tempe is a Pearl figure associated with the energies of the forest; her liaison with the antipodean child Maud and her attempt to sacrifice Maude to Eddie/Tane is an attempt to sacrifice the European to the forest god and to gain revenge for the corruption of her mother and the destruction of their homeland by the European. Girlie's 'evil' ('I am perfectly evil, perfectly strong') is 'an antidote to her miniature size', which is in turn an emblem of her powerlessness. Like so many of the girl children in Hanrahan's fiction she has been stunted by a sinister old man: 'It was the one she loved who stunted her most. Girlie had been maimed early on. The reward of Papa's tyrant arms about her had set her off playing little girl for life ... while a docile Girlie sat on Papa's knee ... a stranger Girlie jeered inside her head and spat out the silent maledictions that cut at the sentimental fug.' (p. 17)
32. Claire Kahane, 'The Gothic Mirror', in *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 334-6. All further references are included in the text.
33. Stella's belated awakening from Victorian legend takes place during her own pregnancy when she explores the house/body that has become her domain, encountering in a trunk in the attic the forgotten letters of Pensa, the spectral mother ('If it happened to Pensa, why not me?'). See pp. 185-7.
34. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 96, 78.
35. As Teresa de Lauretis suggests: 'woman, the other-from-man (nature and Mother, site of sexuality and masculine desire, sign and object of men's social exchange) is the term that designates at once the vanishing point of our culture's fictions of itself and the condition of the discourses in which the fictions are represented' (*Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 5). See also Sherry Ortner's influential essay, 'Is Female to Male as Nature to Culture?', in *Woman, Culture & Society*, edited by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 67-89.



# Digging Deep: Olga Masters, Storyteller

In a recent interview, Olga Masters discussed how her fiction relates to her former work as a journalist:

Most of the jobs I got as a journalist were human interest stories, and that was a great help, not a hindrance at all, because you would sometimes take quite an ordinary and humble person and write a story about them, and you'd be surprised at the quality that was there in the ordinary human being. I write about ordinary people all the time really. My characters err on the side of being very simple and ordinary, rather than, say, wealthy or exciting, and I think I got that from journalism. I learned a lot about human nature and human behaviour as a journalist. I worked on small papers, and you'd go out for a story and it wouldn't be much of a story, but you'd make it into a story. The lesson was that there is more in life, more in situations than meets the eye. The deeper you dig, the more you find.<sup>1</sup>

'The deeper you dig, the more you find' is also true of Masters' own fiction where life at its most ordinary opens up to reveal a multiplicity of stories, one developing out of another. She continually draws attention to the way people create their own stories, and the process of story-making is itself an important theme in her writing. Gossip, childhood imaginings, self-dramatization and the construction of family legends are all means by which her characters attempt to transform their daily lives into fiction. Some of the most highly charged moments occur when the fiction being created by one character conflicts with the narrative pattern another is trying to establish. Although Olga Masters' first book, *The Home Girls*, contains several stories with contemporary and urban settings, most of her fiction is set in rural New South Wales between the wars, enabling her to exploit the faint exoticism time has lent to a way of life which was once thoroughly commonplace. But she never allows us to forget that the ordinary is also a source of amazement, and the stuff out of which stories are made. In 'A Spread of Warm Blood', two sisters tell one another an unending narrative, only partially accessible to an outsider, of life in their home time:

After a day or two, they tended to lapse into their old ways, talking about the ripening state of the pears for jam, the suitability of a piece of meat Frank brought home for baking or braising, or the gravity of the last heart attack of old Mrs Annie Moore. They did not bother to explain any preliminaries for Doreen, who was unaware of the nearness of the Cobargo show, Frank's habit of bringing home the poorer cuts of meat for them to deal with, and the fact that Mrs Moore's heart condition had deteriorated since Doreen's last visit.<sup>2</sup>

Many of Masters' characters define their lives through discussing the events which happen to them, and, even more enthusiastically, those which befall other people. Gossip is a principal means of story-telling in the communities she depicts, and an important part of her subject-matter. Sometimes it assists the narrative development, reinforcing theme or helping to establish tone, but Masters also uses it to show characters themselves imposing narrative form on their daily lives. It is often rich in imaginative detail, graphically expressed: 'Ethel Moore was a very mean woman who was said to shave her corn beef servings with a razor blade and take milk separated of its cream, fed by other farmers to their pigs, to make custards and rice pudding' (*LTD*, p. 151). On several occasions Masters shows characters rehearsing pieces of gossip, polishing them in their minds so they can be delivered with maximum effect. Marie Carroll, driving recklessly along the road in 'The Teacher's Wife', sees in her rear vision mirror the faces of children 'memorizing tales for their mothers at home'. Thomas Cleary in 'The Rages of Mrs Torrens', delighted by a smart question from his son about raging Torrens, 'whispered the sentence to have it right to tell at the mill next day' (*HG*, p. 9). When the local postmaster inadvertently witnesses the Lang women's nightly bedtime ritual, they become a story for the whole town, and this notoriety makes them an appropriate subject for the larger narrative Masters is composing (*HG*, p. 95). Gossip helps in formulating local legend — 'Ask her has she seen her birth certificate, and her Ma and Pa's marriage certificate. Ask her which one came first' (*HG*, p. 147) — and in preserving memories of the past, as when Horrie Went denounces Clyde Barton because his long dead father made some profit cattle duffing (*HG*, p. 185).

Gossip is like food, sustaining the community and nourishing its prejudices. An innocent remark by a Torrens child about one of her mother's exploits is gleefully relayed around the town: 'Tantello feasted on it.' Nellie Wright in 'The Creek Way' knows that her unprecedented departure from school at eleven o'clock in the morning will be eagerly recounted by her classmates after school: 'It would take a lot of bucket rattling by fathers and big brothers to get them outside to help at the

dairy with news like that to chew over with bread and melon jam' (*HG*, p. 145). People long to witness deplorable behaviour so they can continue to entertain one another with stories about it. The mill wives of Tantello dutifully suggest that Mrs Torrens may suffer no more rages, while eagerly hoping that she will. Those attending a card evening in Cobargo are secretly delighted by signs that a long-running family feud still persists.

Brighter were the eyes for the discovery, relishing sighs expanding chests, hard and soft, flat and narrow, wide and cavernous. Some looked on the euchre night as a dull affair to which they were dutifully committed, the feuding Cullens injecting interest. Oh dear me, said the half shakes of the wise heads, this is going on forever (may it never stop). (*LTD*, p. 149)

Although gossip pervades the entire community, Masters reveals that there are both female and male narratives. In *Loving Daughters* a group of women discuss the food tent at the annual Wyndham picnic races: 'The food tent! Who gave what and who cunningly covered their donation to take it home untouched? Who dodged the job of stocking the fire under the tins boiling the water for tea, and spent their time flirting with the men leaning on the counter between races?' (p. 17). In 'A Haircut on Saturday', the man in the barber's chair is gleefully observed by two waiting customers, as the barber's sister, whose lover he had once been, comes into the shop: 'Grace had something to show old Charlie, no doubt about that! The only difference was he had seen it before. He'd love to see it again though, simply love to see it, make no mistake about that! They got the story ordered and ready for the first group of yarning males they could join' (*LTD*, pp. 160-1).

But Masters makes it plainly apparent that gossip, although a source of narrative delight, is also a highly repressive means of social control. In the rural communities she portrays, anyone who steps outside their narrowly defined sex role becomes a subject of censorious comment, whether it is Mr Jussep making the daily batch of scones when his wife is too busy, or Marie Carroll, the teacher's wife, seen driving the car empty of children, leaving her husband to do 'women's work like carrying the baby about while she was off somewhere and other Cobargo women were beating tough steak with a mallet to make a tasty braise for tea' (*LTD*, p. 81). The gossips may be so busy constructing social reality in accordance with their own assumptions, they often fail to see the true story acted out in their midst. In 'Tea With Sister Paula', the public estimation of Dan and Emily Russell — 'she's a hard one, a sour piece if you ask me, and old Dan such a good bloke too' — completely reverses the

view which Masters presents (*LTD*, p. 68). Dan is the sour, repressive one, bitterly resentful of the public derision inflicted on him by the mere existence of his retarded, fourteen-year-old daughter, Dorothy, and angry that Emily actually likes the child. Community values are asserted through the eager interest people take in one another's lives, and gossip is a principal means of isolating deviants: 'Cobargo people did not use terms like retarded or mentally deficient. They called Dorothy a crompt' (*LTD*, p. 68).

Those who transgress sexually are still more savagely isolated. Paradoxically, gossip, for all its open exposure, feeds on secrecy, furtiveness and silence, a situation Masters explores in some detail in 'Not the Marrying Kind'. Millie Clarke, although an attractive and intelligent young woman, is even more a pariah than Dorothy Russell, because her mother, Annie, who bore her at the age of sixteen, was unmarried, and some of the town's resentment stems from a failure to discover who her father was. But the local antagonism has its roots in a profound horror of female sexuality, and an insistence that it must be rigidly controlled. This attitude has been internalised by Amy, the grandmother who raises Millie and does everything in her power to seclude the girl, terrified if she shows even the remotest signs of sensual pleasure:

At tea that night, Millie remembered and put her head back and laughed suddenly under the lamp swinging above the table. Amy, remembering Annie dancing under the lantern, got up and unhooked the light and set it on the food safe behind her chair.

'Don't laugh at nothing,' Amy said. 'Only crazy people do that.' (*LTD*, p. 96)

Amy is unable to talk to Millie about her fears, as she had been with her mother before her, because she has no appropriate words for sexual matters — to menstruate is 'to have the «things»' — and to find words would be to condone what she along with the rest of the town considers an outrage: 'Amy never said aloud what Annie had done, not even to Arthur.' So Millie grows up in a house with 'a shamefaced look about it', hidden behind a great wistaria bush with 'a tangle of trunks like so many writhing snakes' which, resembling the force of public opinion, seems ready to engulf the entire house pushing it deep into the earth, so that a young life is left to wither in empty frustration.

Throughout all her fiction Masters shows herself keenly aware of how vulnerable children are to adult injustice and cruelty, but at the same time she celebrates their energy and capacity for wonder. In their attempts to understand the mysterious intimations of adult life, they draw heavily upon imagination to produce images stranger and more

mysterious still. When the Carroll children learn their mother's intention to be the first woman member of the committee organizing the Cobargo show, they imagine her as a show woman 'in tight clothes walking a tightrope as they had seen one in a circus that came last year'. When, in 'A Haircut on Saturday', Elsie Boyle is taken inside first the Phillips house and then the much more splendid dwelling of old Mrs Williams, she imagines each as a possible setting for her own impoverished family. She envisages Mrs Boyle and her sisters cleaning and tidying with great satisfaction the large brown cabinet in the disorderly Phillips household, and she can also see her younger brothers and sisters playing on Mrs Williams' back verandah where her mother could hang the washing on rainy days. The child weaves her own stories around the two houses which the author has described and incorporated into the fabric of the narrative presented for us to read. We are also shown how children understand and explore the imaginative possibilities of a situation, as the Churcher children wonder about the contents of the mysterious parcel their sister has sent from Sydney, or the little Torrenses speculate on what the money thrown into the creek by their mother, in one of her rages, might have bought: 'Pounds and pounds of butter... Tinned peaches, jelly, fried sausages...' (*HG*, p. 11).

Children are also shown creating their own fictions as a way of reshaping unpalatable reality. At the end of 'The Home Girls', two sisters travel from one foster home to the next, devising stories to impress the other children they will meet there. The hated white-tiled bathroom, which they had desecrated just before leaving because it symbolised all the pressures of conformity imposed on them, is now transformed into a glorious status symbol — 'We lived in this beautiful house with our own bathroom' — while a sudden swerve by the car they are travelling in inspires thoughts of an interestingly tragic accident — 'There was this terrible accident killing our father and mother' (*HG*, p. 7). The story ends with the girls on a journey fantasising about their future, for the story of their lives has still a long way to go. It is also typical of the open-ended way in which Masters concludes so many of her stories. By showing characters making up and unmaking stories, or, through their actions, contradicting stories devised by others, she draws attention to the fluidity of all narrative structures, including her own. Masters has said of her own practice as a writer: 'I write in a way that is quite difficult because I don't plot, I simply don't plot at all. I take a situation and write from there, letting the characters do what I think they should do, creating the characters as best I can and letting them run away with the story.'<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes Masters emphasises the fictions generated in daily life by comparing them with those found in books. Young Thomas Cleary, who has his 'Head stuck in a book all day long' asks his father 'How many stories have you got Dad, on Raging Torrens' (*HG*, p. 9). In 'Passenger to Berrigo', Esme McMahon, an avid reader, is sharply aware of the contrast between her own family, likely to respond to any demonstrations of affection with the words 'Don't slobber like a calf', (*HG*, p. 26) and characters in books who spend 'a lot of time in loving communication'. Her sister Sylvia's return on holiday after working in Sydney seems to Esme a highly appropriate occasion for family rejoicing: 'In books, thought Esme, Mrs McMahon would have leaned over and clutched Sylvia and the flowers would have been trampled uncaringly in the embrace' (*HG*, p. 41). Masters' story is in fact concerned with the deep tensions between the mother and the eldest daughter, but Esme persists in romanticising the homecoming. High flown literary conventions are set alongside the bleak, mundane circumstances in which life is so often lived, partly to poke some gentle fun at childish romanticism, but also to suggest a measure of interaction between literature and life. The story contrasts three different narratives — the harsh existence led by the struggling McMahon family in the country, the more exalted notions the little girl Esme derives from her reading, and the elaborate fantasy of her grand life in Sydney which Sylvia concocts for her brothers and sisters, attempting to conceal the fact that she earns only a meagre living in her job there as a maid. Her dramatic performance is yet another variety of story-making in which a number of Masters' other characters also indulge, and it is perhaps significant that the author began her literary career as a playwright. Sylvia McMahon's pose of refinement and sophistication, although pathetically contrived, provokes the appropriate response of round-eyed wonder and admiration from most of her siblings. But characters who adopt a dramatic stance are often disappointed when others fail to respond on cue. The man from the lottery office in 'A Poor Winner' regards himself as a key player in a grand drama when he brings Mrs Halliday news of her rich prize, but she outrages him by refusing to play her part correctly because lifelong material and emotional deprivation have left her irretrievably poor:

The man was seething. Sometimes on occasions similar to this he was given champagne, sometimes he was cried over, sometimes he was promised money (though this seldom eventuated) and mostly he was asked back for a celebration party (which he wasn't allowed to attend under a rule of the lottery office) but never had he encountered a winner like Mrs Halliday.

He remembered her at the table with her arms around her old shopping bag saying nothing.

A waste, a waste, a waste! cried the man to himself getting into the car which was shabby and old and in need of replacing.

Give me a rich winner any time. (*HG*, p. 114)

Although, in Masters' fiction, the capacity to generate stories is associated with the energy and abundance of life, a retreat into fantasy poses dangers. In 'Call Me Pinkie' a desperately alienated and unhappy woman withdraws almost completely from her family responsibilities, even snatching the baby from her breast and throwing him down on the couch to rush to the door every time a car passes by. All her hopes and interests are centred on this vision of the world moving past, and she makes up stories about the travellers to the puzzlement of the little girl who narrates the story: 'I saw a woman in the front seat with a big black hat on... There was a big pink rose under the brim' (*HG*, p. 120). Another equally unhappy woman is presented in 'A Young Man's Fancy', but here it is the young husband who fantasises with dream after dream of a happy housewife in a beautifully kept home with two well-cared-for little girls. He even imagines his secretary in the role: 'He stripped her of her black jumper with the high collar touching her ears and put her in a flowered apron. He saw her putting the living room in order clearing the floor of toys with the little girls swooped on top of her' (*HG*, p. 88). The young man's fantasies are a means of coping with a desperately disturbed and disordered domestic situation, but the story also leaves one with the feeling that the fantasies themselves, which are after all those endorsed by society as a whole, may be part of the pressure which has made his wife so emotionally distraught.

The reverend Edwards, longing to extricate himself from a painful personal situation, writes a letter to his mother in England at the end of *Loving Daughters* fantasising a possible future for his wife, his sister-in-law and the child about to be born to him. That he himself recognizes his imaginings are the stuff of romance is revealed at the novel's conclusion when, in a gesture which signals a gain in maturity, he drops his letter into the fire: 'Then the pages turned to transparency, and when he last looked reminded him of frail waves breaking upon some strange metal coloured sea' (p. 319). The act of burning the letter renders suspect all the news it contains about those living in the district, and in some measure casts doubt on the contents of the entire novel. No exercise of the imagination, however inspired, can ever hope to pin down life in all its variableness. No story is ever complete, because life flows on regardless, even though individual lives are extinguished.

Violet had not seen the cemetery since Nellie's burial. All denominations used it, the cost of the land being shared between Catholics, Anglicans and Presbyterians, there being too few Methodists in Wyndham to bear a share, and needing to change their religion on their deathbeds or have their bodies bumped over many miles to Candelo or Pambula. Wide strips of grass were planted to divide the sections. But Wyndham grew careless of tending it and allowed growth to run riot, so that Michaelmas daisies, a favourite of Kathleen O'Toole, struggling weakly on her grave, flung their seed onto the grave of Dora McDonald where they grew luxuriantly, mocking the barriers of religion and the fact that Kathleen and Dora were bitter enemies in life. (*LD*, p. 41)

Within the framework of daily life which appears so predictable, stir astonishing catastrophes and denouements prompted by people's innermost hidden desires, and each completed story contains within it the seeds of many others waiting to burst through the boundaries of narrative.

## NOTES

1. Jennifer Ellison, *Rooms of Their Own* (Ringwood: Penguin Books Australia, 1986), p. 218.
2. *A Long Time Dying* (St Lucia: U.Q.P., 1985), p. 136. Other page references to *LTD* are given in the text. The other works by Olga Masters referred to in this paper are *The Home Girls* (St Lucia: U.Q.P., 1982), referred to as *HG*, and *Loving Daughters* (St Lucia: U.Q.P., 1984), referred to as *LD*. Two further works by Olga Masters, a novel *Amy's Children* and a collection of short stories *The Rose Garden and Other Stories*, will be published posthumously by U.Q.P. See Alison Coates and D'Arcy Randall, 'A Tribute to Olga Masters', *Australian Book Review* (No 26, November 1986), pp. 4-5.
3. *Olga Masters, 'A Long Time Dying', The View From Tinsel Town*, ed. Tom Thompson (Southerly/Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1985), p. 43.



# Diane Fahey

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## ANDROMEDA

She was the first pin-up.  
Naked and bejewelled,  
she was chained to a rock,  
then thrown by heavy-breathing  
winds into wild postures:  
at each new angle, lightning  
popped like a photographer's flash.

The gold circling her neck  
matched her hair, the emeralds  
her eyes, the rubies her nipples,  
and the amethysts those bruises  
covering her skin, once pearl-  
white as for all princesses.

In lulls of wind, she pulled  
against iron, stood almost straight.  
The sky was a mouth swallowing her,  
the sun a glimmering eye;  
lolling in the tide, a sea-dragon  
slithered and gargled like  
some vast collective slob.

From afar, Perseus saw her first  
as a creature writhing on a rock;  
close up, she was a whirlpool  
of rage and terror and shame.  
The dragon he changed to stone  
with hardly a thought. But  
his strength almost failed him  
in breaking those chains.

Looking away from her nakedness,  
he smooths her ankles, wrists.  
She waits for the moment  
when he will meet her eyes.

## CORONIS AND APOLLO

A god chose me,  
depriving me of choice.

All the same,  
I made my choice: a mortal.

The birds were silent  
as I reached for his hand

and curved it round my belly,  
made fertile by the god.

Then the crow made its choice  
and told Apollo,

whose sister murdered me,  
destroying my fire with fire.

Midwived as I died, I bore  
a mortal god for whom

life is a double gift,  
and birth, a memory of dying,

each breath a healing.  
Even in death

there is longing.  
Can that be healed,

Asclepius?

## OENONE AND PARIS

Gone. No words of parting or rejection.  
Not even the sight of his back turned on her.

At first it seems like walking from the sea,  
so heavy her limbs, her strength draining into earth.

The sun presses into her flesh, its warmth a pain.  
Now she lies in a darkened room, destroying him,

his brightness. Her eyes are blank, her mouth tight.  
Rumour coughs and mentions there is a war somewhere —

a mere wisp, a feather floating in the air.  
Her eyes no longer alter with the light.

But when he is brought to her to heal — to her,  
the daughter of Asclepius — she sees him clearly —

his face darkening, blood welling from every limb.  
She turns her back, walks to the empty room.

His death is a wisp. She opens the shutters,  
studies how a feather may blot out the sun.

One day she ventures out. The war is over.  
She has won. Brightly, coldly, shines the sun.

## DAPHNE AND APOLLO

Each has been wounded  
by a different dart.

He loves, but she does not.  
He is a god, she mortal.

Neither can stop:  
she fleeing, he pursuing.

He is relentless  
but, in the end, frees her.

She is consumed by fear  
but, in the end, surrenders.

She is calm as the earth  
embraces her feet,

changes her body  
to root, trunk, leaf.

His arms encircle her,  
yielding her up.

She moves, yet is still,  
whispers, yet is silent.

He yearns without desire,  
celebrates without possession.

This love he stays true to,  
honours, is honoured by.

## NIOBE

At the end, what bird could you have become?  
One that can never return to its plundered nest,  
must circle and circle until it falls —  
only in death accepting any resting place.

But, as stone that can weep, it will take  
immeasurably longer for you to wear yourself away:  
the grieving commensurate with the loss.  
That slow trickle down flesh as cold as the gods.

# Barbara Giles

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I MUST HASTEN LEST I DISAPPEAR... ...TOBIAS BERGGREN

I shall not hurry. For me, Haste's  
bad. Poems get mussed, miscarry. Go  
poem's pace, you can't force flowering

with hotbeds, taking cuttings, cloning.  
The poem blooms in its own season.  
Wait for it. Feed it poets, poems.

Be ready with fuel, tho spectacular fires  
begin spontaneously (a haystack kindles,  
soiled rags ignite) expect damp spells.

You'll need a dancer's muscles, dancer's patience.  
Practice perfection — tho you have no rights.  
The rights are with the poem when it comes.

# John Tranter

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## ON LOOKING INTO THE AMERICAN ANTHOLOGY

### 1

In California a young man is stuffing a briefcase —  
first a jug of light, the words 'water'  
and 'stone', a blurred image of a guy in a pickup  
truck with a gun

staring through the hush-squeak, hush-squeak  
of the wipers, a frail woman, crying. A leaf, a sob,  
a clod of mud. There! His class awaits the real,  
the Deep and Meaningful.

Driving downtown he sees a pair of jugglers  
inch up the face of a glass cathedral full of  
marriages, mirrored in the noon glare, one on top,  
and then his double.

The neon signs in the suburbs full of graves say  
'Giants Drank and Died Here'. Autos, rusting trucks,  
police helicopters roam restlessly, their motto: Do it  
First, and do it Fast.

### 2

Down here in New Zealand, jet-lagged in transit  
at the bottom of the planet, a clutch of  
Flight Attendants giggle in a corner: one gay,  
the others married.

The sun that has looked down on Hollywood,  
on lust, Las Vegas and the will to power,  
rises, *rhododactylos*, on Auckland Airport:  
    through the tinted glass

a perfect field of fodder, five sheep,  
a tractor nosing at the sedge, the shrill  
cacophony of jets rehearsing like a madman  
    staring at a vase.

Nothing the amusing natives do or say here  
matters in the Capital. The giant engines lift us  
through the sky. The next stop — Australia —  
    is the end of the line.

## Connie Barber

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### THE OLDEST FRUIT

Spring came late, summer reluctantly,  
dry with clouded sun.  
The tree sucked what it could from its old earth;  
our feeble watering  
barely made amends  
for want of warmth and rain.

Plums a month late. For the first time  
plums to give away;  
blood red flesh and juice bottled for winter.  
After the holiday we ate plums and plums  
while the fig tree spread huge hands  
grasping the day's surface.

Dry and hard, poised on soaring shafts,  
pithy, tasteless, cold,  
shaded by tough leaves from a dwindling sun  
figs, outliving summer,  
refused to fall for the bronzewings  
who fled to their pecking below the wattle.

A grey morning came, magpies sang  
stepping among wet grass  
when currawongs arrived, flopped and fluttered  
among thick leaves,  
their season for fruit,  
pecked at the figs, swore and flew on.

The pigeons fed far from the tree.  
As the magpies sang  
louder and louder, pale yellow moon palms  
shrivelled and curled and fell.  
No black frost spots touched  
those golden hands or the bright fruit.

On a carpet of leaves the figs fell;  
mine in this strange season.  
The secret wombs, hard and sour and green,  
flower and fruit, ripened;  
without frost, saved  
from a late spring and a dry summer.

Figs joined with bitterest orange,  
with hot ginger earth hands,  
transformed by sugar, arrow sweet  
which flowers as the day shortens.  
Genii ancient as song  
bottled — a myth as old as time.

The dusky currawongs came crying.  
One clung to the wattle.  
His golden eye glared into the kitchen  
where the fruit and the magpies' call,  
refined as gold, rest.  
For days they cried in the tree tops.



# Richard Kelly Tipping

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## MANGROVE CREEK (for Neil Taylor, Sue & Crystal)

1.

Bare-breasted in stinging sun  
(from wrap around verandahs  
of the only house for hours —  
a painter's piece of heaven)  
to follow the creek's slow  
yawning swerves  
unwinding down a bark-  
flake track of smoothskin eucalypts  
naked, stepping from the clothes  
around their ankles. The bush flies  
flirt, loud-mouthed as Saturday.

2.

Valley of nesting plovers cry  
while whip-birds crack  
the pheasant pigeons coo-coo-coo  
and startled cows  
the dogs send thumping  
cross-swamp, wide-eyed;  
the black snake rolls  
red belly round, S-  
curves through dung.  
One bull's gone puff-eye blind  
and thuds dread circles.

3.

Dharug, the people, gone. A name.  
Cliffs can't stop weeping.

The National Park starts there  
on the ridge, beyond the tucked-  
away ruins of farmers,  
the skeletal edges of cast-iron beds  
grown through with gums.  
The gravestones are losing their tongues  
for palm trees and roses,  
chimneys and cattle runs.  
'You who come my grave to see  
Prepare yourselves to follow me.'

4.

Our children sapling young  
amaze the creek, such tight-  
formed bodies, the water dragons  
leap past logs — under a hot  
blue sky, exuberance of wattle —  
raucous tiny flowers  
from fern-sprung grass  
the hillsides peak: Spring tips  
on sombre green. A lone blue wren  
tip-tails and goes. Make love  
among mosquitoes; no one knows.

## MANGROVE CREEK REVISITED

Wet Christmas — the frogs cheer.  
Goanna, sniff-tongue, gripping a dark branch  
in bellies of cloud:  
all the little clues come home  
with a proud yell — dogs yelp  
the ducks into flight, a circle  
of casual but formal energy —  
the handwriting of each tree  
layering blocks of pattern  
as the van bumps, skids, splashes  
us back. My drawings; your poems.

I wanted to read Japanese poetry  
by the creek, time-sitting you, Kai,  
with a long yellow rope across  
shallow sandbar water, set up  
haul, fish and splashing games  
for one — me in the brimming shade  
not to be called to crocodile rescue squad  
by your bright-eyed shout  
but relishing the bilateral spark  
and so missed half of what  
you did, too late. Time's repeatable  
isn't it? Sorry, mate.

#### FRIDAY — THE RIDGE

Carried Kai alltheway up, through scratching,  
tough rocks, Maze copping a splinter, antbite,  
& Jedda, always in the way (panting old Blue  
Pointer) with Jock the Labrador (ex Robin Gibson)  
and Henry the Red Setter panting too, up and  
past — 'Yow-w' says Black Feather the lean  
ball-pop tabby cat, came along too, right to  
the lumpy ridge (sparkling ochre sandstones)  
run by Banksia Men and Secret Places, Sacred  
Flowers. Maze couldn't hack it, essentially, only  
SO much tolerance, but still did (complaining,  
shouting) climb to the middle of Nowhere: to  
look down on the slow sweep of valley floor,  
swamp and riddles of shape and date. Climbed  
down through a squadron of weeping 'native  
pines' and delicate unknown bushyness, deadly  
little blackberry shoots infesting crevices  
and nooks of moss, to the hand-deep creek, where  
we all stripped off and lay, bushy-tailed and  
vivid, in the cool, meandering water, Mangrove  
Creek, so called.

## BOWERBIRD, THE ARTISTS' CAMP (for Tim Storrier)

1.

i miss you in this river full of stars  
as the moon starts banging branches  
and kingfishers stir in the paperbarks  
i'm restless as the earth is, still  
in time's slow ways ...  
Tim yells from the fire's circle:  
'i can smell goanna piss!'  
and whacks on another song — gone.  
Frank slices celery, brushed with salt  
'an aperitif?' and smiles into flames —  
a deck chair full of painter.  
Stories of the punch-ups for Art,  
the fists full of brain, rolling off  
surface, colour, texture, shape —  
did you walk into a bus? Today  
Hal Porter's in critical, hit by a car  
and Jack Newton chopped by a plane,  
reported by radio, twelve hours ago;  
a day full of conjunctions, flashes  
extremely concentrated: we're making  
what we make here, alone  
somewhere on top of the world.

2.

Walked for hours along the wide, white  
sandy riverbed: spiky-headed pandanus palms,  
tiny purple-mouthed yellow orchids bursting from  
between the river stones; pools of striped fish  
racing shadows. Climbed through suburbs of snake  
track and spiderweb, tracked along  
under the towering ancient ochre cliffs: weathered  
metamorphics, dream fragments.  
Arnhemland is a wilderness of silences  
shattered  
by black cockatoo, by bronzewing, by you

among burst-pod flowering gums, needle  
spear grasses, flies that bite; all the stones  
are rusting.

Listen.                      Soak up

the inhabitedness  
of this rare earth, this chance to feel  
two thousand million years as a flash  
of feathers, a bright exit.

PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

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## Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part I describe in a certain amount of detail a thing which I'm calling a grammar of composition in Malouf's writing. In the second part I try to place this 'grammar' in a political perspective, giving it a particular significance in the framework of post-colonial writing.

Some of the most interesting recent work on Malouf — I am thinking in particular of articles by Peter Pierce, Laurie Hergenhan and Martin Leer<sup>1</sup> — has concentrated on elaborating the significance of a relatively small number of ideas, images and oppositions which seem to recur throughout Malouf's writing. Pierce's discussion revolves mainly around interdependent relationships between individuals, Hergenhan's around moments of imaginative transcendence and transformation, and Leer's around edges and maps. Malouf's writing surely invites this kind of 'motif-analysis', and the author himself has invited it on more than one occasion, most explicitly perhaps in his talk at the Warana Writers' Weekend in 1983, where he identified a set of specific oppositions —

centre and periphery, wild and civilized, self and other — as being ‘right at the centre of almost everything I do’.<sup>2</sup>

Part of what *I* want to do is explore the possibility of integrating the findings of these separate ‘motif-analyses’ in some way. A natural way of doing this, the one which is already implicit in most Malouf criticism, including the articles I mentioned, would be to take the motifs as ‘themes’, and to give them what I’ll call a ‘second-order significance’ by connecting them up into a ‘world-view’, a ‘moral vision’, a ‘structure of feeling’ or some other ethical and epistemological totality of that kind. Some of the difficulties with this kind of integration will emerge as I go along.

Another, more promising possibility is contained in Laurie Hergenhan’s suggestion that the oppositions Malouf mentions in his Warana talk are ‘strategies of expression rather than subjects’.<sup>3</sup> When we think about these and other recurrent elements as ‘strategies of expression’ — and perhaps ‘rules for writing’ is not too bold a translation — we are not very far from thinking about them as a *grammar* of some kind. I shall be using this concept in a fairly unrigorous fashion, simply to designate a system of rules and conventions which both *governs* and to some extent *generates* what happens within a particular field of activity — in this case writing.<sup>4</sup> I think it’s important to describe what I have in mind fairly concretely at this point, so I’d like to start straight away by looking at how three groups of recurrent motifs seem to function in Malouf’s writing: I’ll call them gaps, substitutes, and machines.

The concept of the gap — together with slight variants like discontinuity, disjunction, severance, and lack — is to be found literally everywhere in Malouf’s work. It is tempting to say that it is the defining characteristic of life and the world in their everyday, unredeemed state. Indeed Peter Pierce does say this, or something like it, but only in reference to personal relationships, such as those between fathers and sons in all the novels.<sup>5</sup> But the concept of the gap is much more widely applied than this. It is used, for example, to evoke the geographic and cultural distance between Europe and Australia,<sup>6</sup> and between social classes;<sup>7</sup> it figures frequently in accounts of temporal discontinuities in both personal lives<sup>8</sup> and the larger movements of history;<sup>9</sup> and it expresses the relationship between different, and apparently irreconcilable visual and cognitive perspectives — Jim Saddler’s ‘double vision’, from above and below, firstly of the coastal swamp south of Brisbane, and later of the Flanders battlefield. There are also times when the relationship between writer and reader, actor and audience, artist and spectator, is imaged as a gap, silence, a blankness.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to these 'conceptual' gaps, Malouf's fiction makes repeated reference to physical gaps: in walls and fences, in photographs, between mountains, and so on; and this register of material images exerts a loosely unifying influence on the more diverse field of virtual and metaphorical absences. There are, however, no grounds for assigning a single second-order meaning to this group of motifs. On the contrary, as against the temptation to construct a 'world-view' in which 'the gap' in its various guises is taken to signify deficiency or lack, we need to recognize its radically ambivalent force in Malouf's writing.

This ambivalence can be readily demonstrated by citing instances of the same motif — that of the gap — being used to indicate a positive or enabling condition in one sense or another. The silences of *Harland's Half-Acre*, for example those of Frank Harland's Stanthorpe relatives or Phil Vernon's Aunt Ollie, are clearly defined both as absence of talk (by contrast, respectively, with Clem Harland and Aunt Roo), and also as the condition which enables a certain depth of human feeling and communication.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, to remain with *Harland's Half-Acre*, Phil experiences the gap in the family caused by his dying grandfather's withdrawal from it as producing a stronger sense of the old man's identity and presence than when he was *physically* present.<sup>12</sup> Again, in the paintings of Frank Harland's Southport period, the gaps in representation, the spaces left empty, the figures not included in the picture, are a chief source of their expressive power.

Gaps in Malouf, then, are thoroughly ambivalent entities. And it's not that some gaps are negative and others positive in import, although my examples may have suggested that. It's rather that any gap has the potential to be either, although any given instance is likely to be more strongly negative than positive, or vice versa. But like everything else in Malouf, gaps can change; and there is perhaps no more memorable example of this than the gap underneath Frank Harland's Dutton Park house, the 'wedge of darkness' which is a place of solace for Tam but of death for Gerald.<sup>13</sup>

The general, second-order *significance* of the gaps is literally 'undecidable' in Derrida's sense, but their general *function*, I would argue, is not. They function as terms in a 'grammar of composition' in combination with other terms, to organize pre-existing materials of various sorts into 'new' literary texts. I shall consider some further aspects of their grammatical functioning a bit later. Firstly, though, I'd like to extend my account of the constituents of Malouf's grammar by describing the two other groups of recurrent motifs I mentioned earlier: substitutes and machines. Both groups are related to the 'gap' group by a kind of natural

semiotic complementarity: in plain terms, the gaps scattered throughout the texts are either filled by substitutes or bridged by machines.

The notion of substitution, like the notion of absence, is both ubiquitous and ambivalent in Malouf's work. Its most straightforward guise is when an older brother dies (like Ovid's, the Great Writer's in *Child's Play*, and Frank Harland's) and the gap in the family is filled by a younger brother. In each case, the substitution involved is ambivalent in its effect; it is at once a deterioration, and an enabling condition of creativity. This pattern of personal substitution can have powerfully destructive outcomes: for example, the jealous fury of Phil Vernon's grandmother when she perceives his mother as having replaced her, become her substitute, in relation to the grandfather (though this depends in turn on a further substitution, that of son for husband, in the grandmother's mind);<sup>14</sup> and Antonella's loss and replacement, in *Child's Play*, by Angelo, who makes bombs.<sup>15</sup>

Closely related to this *primary* substitution motif is the motif of 'sameness-and-difference'. Characters are frequently perceived as fascinating because of their close but not perfect similarity to one another: Frank Harland's three half-brothers; Gerald and Jacky, in the same novel; Carla and Adriana (the same person with different disguises) in *Child's Play*.<sup>16</sup> This last example introduces an important variant of the motif, namely play-acting and pretence, the production of substitute selves. Phil Vernon's theatrical Aunt Roo, who devotes her life to this activity, highlights *its* irreducible ambivalence; she is a compulsive and self-deluding liar who is yet able (with some good fortune) to effect a real self-transformation into the woman of wealth and taste she had pretended to be.

The theme of 'self-creation' is, as Martin Leer and others have pointed out, present in all of Malouf's work — in *Johnno*, *An Imaginary Life*, and *Child's Play* it is arguably the central concern.<sup>17</sup> But it is important, I think, to see it as contained within, even in a sense generated by, the more abstract motif of substitution, of which there are many other, less personal realizations. The question of Australian cultural identity, for example, is frequently posed in these terms, as when Knack the Polish antique-dealer for whom Australia itself is a poor substitute for Europe, finds in Frank Harland's painting of an Australian landscape a substitute of a different kind, a positive *supplement* in fact, which improves upon the 'real thing', producing in its place a country of the future for which there are as yet 'no inhabitants'.<sup>18</sup>

Malouf's substitution motif exhibits two further variations of special interest. The first is metamorphosis, that process by which a single entity



passes through one or more successive states of difference — or more properly of sameness-and-difference. It has a particular significance for *An Imaginary Life* with its focus on Ovid, but it has a currency all through the novels and poems, and outside them as well: I am thinking of the *Meanjin* interview in which Malouf speaks of the ‘translation’ of European cultural objects and styles to Antipodean settings.<sup>19</sup>

The process is, again, ambivalent — changes in people and things may be for the worse or the better, nor will it always be clear which is which. An interesting product of this double ambivalence is the image of the hybrid — werewolf, hermaphrodite, centaur, but also less traditional combinations of people and machines. The latter are especially frequent, not surprisingly, in *Fly Away, Peter* and *Child’s Play*. In *Harland’s Half-Acre* there is a memorably ambivalent image of a soldier and a woman fucking against a wall in South Brisbane, ‘the two of them making a single creature with two locked and moaning heads, a mythological beast to which he couldn’t have given a name’.<sup>20</sup>

The other extension of the substitution motif, by way of pretence and play-acting, is of course play in general. Like metamorphosis, play carries within it the contradictory promise of civilized freedom and destructive violence. The antinomies of play are explicit in *An Imaginary Life* and, as both titles imply, these have become thematically quite central in the next two novels, *Child’s Play* and *Fly Away, Peter*: the young terrorist’s extended preparations for the murder are in one sense an elaborate game-for-one, with assumed identities and multiple narrative possibilities, while the horror of the trenches is sometimes seen as a team game which has escaped rational controls.<sup>21</sup>

The last example, from *Fly Away, Peter*, leads very naturally into the third and last group of motifs: machines. Machines are one of Malouf’s long-standing obsessions, and they figure in one guise or another, in almost everything he has written, from the title poem of his early volume, *Bicycle and Other Poems* to most of the stories in *Antipodes*. That this preoccupation has received so little critical notice, in comparison with other far less prominent and persistent motifs in his work, is perhaps a measure of its resistance to *moral* translation. It’s that same morally non-committal quality that makes it a very clear illustration of the ‘grammatical’ function I want to ascribe to Malouf’s recurrent motifs.

I proposed earlier that we might think of machines, in terms of the general economy of Malouf’s grammar of composition, as things that bridge gaps. Because they are, almost by definition, man-made assemblages of elements of the non-human world, the gaps they seek to bridge are frequently those between the human and the non-human. In this

respect, the machine is a variant of the 'edge' motif and analogous with the animal-human hybrids. Its differentiating characteristic, clearly, is the notion of human agency and purpose. Machines, whether bicycles, cameras, cars, clocks, aeroplanes, surfboards, guns, sewing machines, cinemas or pianolas — these are just some of the machines that figure in Malouf's writing — all represent human attempts to achieve working relationships with the material world. But the relationships, the bridges, are not only of the material technological kind. The school photograph at the beginning of *Johnno* effects a junction between previously separated time periods; the bi-plane at the beginning of *Fly Away, Peter* is not only a machine for bridging physical distance, it also joins the mythically separate realms of earth and sky and the different species of humans and birds. Later, when Jim Saddler goes for a 'spin' in it, it bridges his close-up world of 'individual grassblades' and the 'long view of the country ... laid out like a relief-map'.<sup>22</sup> Finally, in combination with a cigarette-rolling machine, the bi-plane helps to bridge the *social* distance between Jim and Ashley Crowther, against the class and national chauvinism of Jim's father who objects to the 'fancy accents', 'new-fangled ideas' and 'machines' of Ashley and his set.<sup>23</sup> In the same way, it is the English woman Imogen Harcourt's photographic equipment that cements a relationship between herself and Jim.

The machine motif is metaphorically extended to include various types of 'mechanical' human behaviour: repetitive, ritualized and obsessive activity are frequently so termed, and they perform bridging functions analogous to those of the real machines. An obvious example, from *Fly Away, Peter*, is the military regulation of mental and physical behaviour which does produce a certain kind of social cohesion. In combination with the real machines of war, it also illustrates the extreme ambivalence of the connections and alliances which are achieved by this means.

One final point about Malouf's machines, whether real or metaphorical, is that the connections they forge, the unities they establish, are very makeshift and provisional affairs in which the joins are visible, the link is incomplete, or something is left out. Military discipline cannot contain the murderous animosity between Jim Saddler and Wizzer Green, the contrived pretences of Aunt Roo and Gerald cannot close off the unpredictable onset of suicidal despair, the terrorist's mind ('a machine with a life of its own') cannot effect a final conjunction of present planning with future action (the Great Man's sister provides a last-minute complication). In a more literal mode, the terrorist's camera cannot quite complete the circle of the Piazza.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, their fallibility, the machines differ from the often miraculous-seeming fusions that occur in

nature or the imagination. Mechanical unities are all human beings can hope to achieve by their own efforts.

As that last remark might suggest, Malouf's own efforts as a writer can very easily and naturally be included among the mechanical, connection-making activities. Many of the activities performed by different characters and marked with the mechanical tag involve the use of language, and can quite readily be taken as metaphors of Malouf's own writing: Jim Saddler's listing of the local bird species; the studied role-playing by Aunt Roo and Gerald; habitual letter-writing with little hope of a sympathetic reception; playing with different narrative possibilities, like the terrorist in *Child's Play*, or flirting precariously with destructive passions and forbidden identities, like the Great Writer in the same novel. I'll have more to say about these and other reflexive metaphors in a moment.

At this point, though, I think I should try to state as precisely as possible what I've been saying (and also what I haven't been saying). First and foremost, I've been describing a system of motifs, which extends right throughout the body of Malouf's writing, and which I call a *grammar of composition*. What I'm *not* saying is that these are 'key images', or even 'key ideas', in an overarching structure of meaning — hence my emphasis on the irreducible ambivalence of each motif across the range of its particular appearances in the texts. It is this that effectively prevents the motifs from falling into large-scale semantic patterns of a stable and non-contradictory kind.

The feature of the whole system that I hope will have been conveyed by my detailed illustrations is its high level of *reticulation*, the fact that every motif is connected directly to some, and indirectly to all the other motifs, within a general systematic economy of absence and presence. All the motifs I've dealt with — gaps, substitutes, play, metamorphosis, machines, hybrids, and the rest — as well as those discussed by other people, such as pairings, edges and maps — have their place in this system. This doesn't mean, however, that the system is present in all its constituent motifs from the earliest texts to the latest; it grows in complexity and inclusiveness from book to book, while retaining, at each stage, its highly reticulated wholeness as a system.

Thus, for example, the grammar which is functioning in *Antipodes* is somewhat larger and more complicated than the one operating in *Johnno*. Indeed, it's larger by at least one important new motif than the grammar operating in *Harland's Half-Acre*. (The new motif in *Antipodes* is 'chance',

which is connected to the rest of the system through the already established motif of 'play'.)

How then does this grammar of composition work, and what does it have to do with Australia's colonial relations? In answer to the first question, it works, like any grammar, in two distinct ways: as a guide to expression for writers and speakers, and as a means of understanding, of decoding, for readers and listeners. I'm not going to be able to deal with the latter of these functions here, partly because it would require more detailed interpretation of individual texts than the scope of this paper allows. I can, however, deal with the expressive function of the grammar in a general way.

For Malouf-the-writer, I suggest, the grammar of motifs I've described works rather like a classical or Renaissance rhetorical handbook, as a set of 'topoi' or 'places of thought' which can be used to explore the recesses of a pre-selected area of subject-matter, reorganizing, amplifying and elaborating it in various different ways. This may sound like an excessively mechanical account of the writing processes of an author who so frequently alludes, in his work, to the mysterious transforming powers of the creative imagination. I'd argue that this Romantic view of literary composition functions in Malouf's texts as what Terry Eagleton, among others, would call an ideology of literary production, that is, an ideal representation of a productive process, the material reality of which is actually much closer to the fairly accessible and non-mysterious practices described here as rhetorical. The obvious debating point, of course, is that Shakespeare composed rhetorically; but a more specific defence of the rhetorical model can be made by pointing to the *supplementary* relationship Malouf's novels have to a variety of other texts: that of *An Imaginary Life* to works by Itard and by Ovid himself; of *Child's Play* to Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*; of *Fly Away, Peter* to Roger Macdonald's *1915*; of *Harland's Half-Acre* to *The Tree of Man*. Even *Johnno* is a reworking — a very substantial one, obviously, as are all the other reworkings — of pieces of his own earlier writing. This is not intended to impugn Malouf's 'originality' in the least, but to suggest the extent to which his work really does consist, as the rhetorical account would imply it does, of rewriting, elaborating, reordering and amplifying a range of pre-existing textual materials.<sup>25</sup>

Not the least advantage of this way of thinking about Malouf's writing is that it gives us some purchase — finally — on the nature of his perception of, and response to, the writer's position in a post-colonial society like Australia. This has proved to be a rather slippery topic for Malouf

critics, partly because it is so often present in his work in metaphorical rather than literal terms. In fact, the importance critics have attributed to it has varied with the extent to which they have been prepared to read the texts allegorically. Most would agree that *An Imaginary Life* is a fable, if not an allegory, about being a writer 'on the edge' of a contemporary empire, because Malouf himself has given this reading his imprimatur in an interview.<sup>26</sup> Fewer, I suspect, would accept a reading of, say, Jim Saddler's cataloguing activities in *Fly Away, Peter* as a metaphor for writing in a post-colonial culture, though I think it can certainly be read that way. Malouf's work poses the problem of the limits of interpretation in a very acute form, because the relatively restricted grammar of motifs which orders and amplifies the material multiplies the possible analogies between narrative elements, but the fairly naturalistic style doesn't signal which analogies have a special second order significance and which don't. In any case, a wide variety of actions and situations in the novels do lend themselves to interpretation, not just as metaphors of writing in a general sense, but of writing in a specifically post-colonial situation.

I won't at this stage identify fictional instances of this, but simply say that they embody, metaphorically, various ways of thinking about the writer's dilemma in a post-colonial society. These include, for example, the notion of having to work in a makeshift way, with whatever materials come to hand; having to start from scratch, without the benefit of a fully relevant tradition; having to work in isolation from the most receptive audiences, and to address oneself to unsympathetic or uncomprehending audiences; being placed at a distance from the perceived centre of things, and having little sense of the world as an interconnected whole; having to accept, and take responsibility for, an inherited burden of uncongenial or irrelevant cultural traditions.

These all add up to a fairly bleak picture of the post-colonial situation — perhaps not a 'picture' at all so much as a disconnected and somewhat contradictory series of responses to it. In any case, I'm not offering them as constituting a view that Malouf merely expresses or endorses; I want to see them rather as a range of possible obstacles and restrictions which, in his own practice as a writer, he is actively and continuously pressing against, even as he develops the thematic concerns peculiar to each individual novel and short story.

In the larger of these two contexts, that of Malouf's work as a single body of writing, the text functions in what we can call, I believe with some accuracy, a *mechanical* fashion. The *machine* in question is the grammar of motifs itself, which does its work of classifying, reorganizing and amplifying materials into repeated patterns and relations reliably,

unobtrusively, and at a certain mediated distance from the author, whose more immediate concern is with those elements which are distinctive to particular works and remain outside the grammatical system.

What I am proposing, then, is that Malouf practices what amounts to an internal division of authorial labour. Its special appropriateness to a post-colonial situation resides partly in the fact that it shifts the locus of integration from the point of representation to the point of structuration. He doesn't, in other words, depend on fictional representations, of either cultural integration or cultural independence, to bring these any closer to realization, since the very possibility of imagining and signifying them adequately is always already compromised by the fragmenting and constraining effects of both old and new colonial relations on the writer's own consciousness. Instead, he establishes, first, a very minimal (and therefore possible) position of independence from those colonial relations by inventing a grammar, in one sense simply an interconnected arrangement of common motifs, which is *his own* in a way that nothing else in his writing is, or can be. And the effect of this grammar, functioning at a distance from the author's 'colonised' consciousness, is to produce a steady progression, over time, towards real cultural integrations: towards a real sense of wholeness and interconnectedness in the life represented in the texts, and towards an increasingly intimate and knowledgeable relation between the writer and his readership.

Malouf's practice as a writer, then, materially rather than ideally considered, is really two simultaneous practices: writing poems and narratives on the one hand, and devising a grammar for them on the other. By way of conclusion, it is tempting to see an allegory of this double writing practice in *An Imaginary Life*. In his place of exile, the poet Ovid has not only to learn to use a new language; he also has to teach it to the boy, who then becomes his helper and ultimately his guide. Bizarre as it might sound, if Ovid stands for Malouf, the Boy almost has to stand for Malouf's personal grammar of composition.

## NOTES

1. Peter Pierce, 'David Malouf's Fiction', *Meanjin*, 41 (1982), 526-534; Laurie Hergenhan, 'Discoveries and Transformations: Aspects of David Malouf's Work', *ALS*, 11 (1984), 328-341; Martin Leer, 'At the Edge: Geography and Imagination in the Work of David Malouf', *ALS*, 12 (1985), 3-21.
2. 'Three Talks', *ALS*, 11 (1984), 317.
3. Hergenhan, 328.

4. My use of the term 'grammar' owes something in a very general sense to the likes of Todorov and Greimas. I think there are more specific affiliations with the work of Marc Eli Blanchard in *Description: Sign, Self, Desire. Critical Theory in the wake of semiotics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980).
5. Pierce, 526.
6. *Johnno* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 20.
7. *Fly Away, Peter* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), pp. 15-16, 57.
8. *Johnno*, p. 100; *Child's Play, with Eustace and The Prowler* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 48; *Harland's Half-Acre* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), pp. 8, 49.
9. *Johnno*, p. 30; *Fly Away, Peter*, p. 36.
10. *Harland's Half-Acre*, pp. 222 ff.; *Child's Play*, p. 86; *An Imaginary Life* (London: Pan Books, 1980), p. 18.
11. *Harland's Half-Acre*, pp. 12-13, 78.
12. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 64.
13. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 170.
14. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 101.
15. *Child's Play*, pp. 96-97.
16. *Child's Play*, p. 131.
17. Leer, 14 ff.
18. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 116.
19. Jim Davidson, Interview with David Malouf, first published in *Meanjin*, 39 (1980); repr. in Davidson, *Sideways from the Page* (Melbourne: Fontana, 1983), p. 276.
20. *Harland's Half-Acre*, p. 123.
21. *Fly Away, Peter*, p. 100.
22. *Fly Away, Peter*, p. 2.
23. *Fly Away, Peter*, p. 6.
24. *Child's Play*, pp. 28-29.
25. For a sympathetic and illuminating account of rhetorical techniques of composition, see Walter J. Ong, *Rhetoric, Romance and Technology* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1971).
26. See Davidson, pp. 277-278.

# lebratya

Richard came home from work one evening and found Martha filling in a survey about friends. A woman had brought it, an hour ago, she said. It was designed to find out what sorts of networks of support people had, what were the patterns of caring; Martha had to write in the names of their good friends, people they could turn to in times of accident, trouble, difficulty; borrow money from, that sort of thing. Possibly people they had already turned to in the past.

Richard scoffed. A trick, he said. A device of burglars and black-mailers. Exploiting gullible people.

— No, said Martha. It's genuine. She described the official identity of the woman who had brought it, showed him the survey booklet, marked with the logo of the Capital Territory Health Commission Social Psychology Unit, produced by the government printer. All above suspicion.

— The government playing big brother, eh. I suppose it's legitimate enough.

— Of course it is, said Martha. It's all part of this business of people in Canberra coming from somewhere else. No grandparents, no family support systems. Total isolation. Archetypal nuclear families. You remember what it was like when Jimmy was born. I mean we had plenty of good friends, but it wasn't like family. Especially as lots of them didn't have children, and didn't understand at all what you were up against. Remember that nice clinic sister in Ainslie, what was her name, sister Neville, telling me about the couple who had twins, and the wife couldn't stand it; they went back to Sydney because it was too much for her on her own.

— I remember you ringing up your father and panicking, said Richard. Telling him you couldn't survive without your mother coming down to give you moral support.

— Yes, said Martha. It even worked. He let her come down for a whole fortnight, leaving him all alone and deserted with only Alison a hundred yards away to save him from himself. And it was terrific, she got me through that awful slough at the beginning.



Martha fell silent, thinking about her tyrant father, whom she'd loved and been irritated by, and whom she thought about a great deal now that he was dead. She often had a melancholy sense of his absence.

— Anyway, she said, after a bit, what friends shall we write down on this jolly list?

— Write down, or dob in?

— When you think of it, we don't call on people much. We're really rather self-contained. These days. Touch wood.

— Mm. I suppose you could say they sometimes call on us. Like Jule. Or Jenny. Not that she asks, but you worry.

— And Frances. But Frances is family. So I expect she doesn't count.

Really rather self-contained, thought Richard. Sufficient unto ourselves is the evil of us. Yet we have friends, we know a lot of people, and there they'll be on a government list to prove it.

After dinner, he was sitting at the study table trying to make the cheque book balance with the bank's statement, so dull and difficult a job that he began doodling instead. He found himself making a pattern of words, in the red and green and blue and black of the four colour biro that he used for money matters. He decorated them with snakes whose forked tongues flickered, and garlands of leaves and fruits. The pattern of the words went like this:

	Friends	
Trust		Love
Faith		Honour
Doubt		Despair
	Betrayal	

Good words. Noble. Implying the ancient virtues. And the ancient sins. Not like *networks of support*. *Patterns of caring*. *The accumulation of distress experiences*. The language gets its own back when it's being conned, he thought. Jargon is its own revenge.

He chucked the chequebook aside and went downstairs to Jimmy doing his homework. Here, he said. You're good at puzzles. Unscramble this. I should warn you, it's rather famously difficult.

He handed him a sheet of paper with the letters lebratya printed on it.

— Many a good brain has foundered on that. See what you make of it.

— An anagram, is it, said Jimmy. Can't be that difficult. He knew he was good at puzzles. How long have I got?

— However long it takes. Get Harriet to help, when you get stuck, said Richard wickedly. She was two years younger, and had no pretensions to being a puzzle expert.

Richard came downstairs next morning to the sound of Martha singing as she poured boiling water through the coffee filter. She didn't sing very well, was a bit flat and wobbly, and had a fondness for hymns; they were so familiar to her from a youth spent church-going that she was reasonably confident of the tunes, and the words helped. She remembered them and the tunes sort of followed.

There's a Friend for little children  
Above the bright blue sky  
A Friend who never changeth  
Whose love can never die

— Are you putting Him on the list? asked Richard. Martha jumped. The family had so long groaned over her hymns (Mum's ill, they said, she's in terrible pain...) that she generally made sure they weren't in hearing when she gave voice. It was one of the sorrows of her life that she couldn't sing; she'd have liked a voice to soar above banality, to create its daily minor works of art. The hymns were an indulgence; she could pretend that she was making music. But only when there was no one around to groan.

— Blame Ian Warden, she said, pointing to the newspaper; he was the local satirist. I've been reading his complaints about that particular hymn being dropped from the new hymnal. First the bowdlerisation of the Lord's Prayer, now the suppression of the great old hymns. Religion isn't what it was.

And defiantly, and loudly, and quite off key, she sang on:

Unlike our friends by nature  
Who change with changing years  
This Friend is always worthy  
The precious name he bears

— Hardly deathless verse, said Richard. I doubt it'll be much missed by the next generation.

— I enjoyed it, said Martha. It's the tradition that counts.

Richard went out into the cold morning. The frost was blue on the grass, the gaudy cones of the liquidambars looked self-conscious in the thin light, which was pale and exhausted by its struggle with the fog. He was irritated to find himself humming Martha's hymn as he drove to work. He turned on the radio and the car filled with the pellucid civilized notes of Corelli. He thought, how Leonardo da Vinci would have enjoyed this, speeding along in a self-propelled vehicle with apparently a full chamber orchestra aboard. Not Corelli, of course, though who? He was rather vague about Leonardo's musical contemporaries — that was something he should look up.

He had a meeting first thing and when he got back to his office at half past ten his secretary stopped him, her face gleaming with horror. Pretty Mrs Beadle, young and efficient, failed by words, or what they stood for.

— Mr Martin ... he telephoned ... at nine o'clock ... he won't be in ... he rang to say ... his daughter ...

Portent was too much for her. She babbled. Her round pink face trembled, and she cried and dwelt on her words, and showed an ugly peeping pleasure in the dreadfulness of her news. Richard was slow to understand her. But the news demanded that. Sense flinched before it, and took cover.

This was what she was saying. Martin's daughter had been murdered by her brother in the night. That was why Martin had rung to say that he would not be in today.

Richard sat in his office and wrote up his report of the meeting. He liked his job; he could use his mind in it. He wondered if he always used all of it, since now part of it went on dealing with Mrs Beadle's news even as he made methodical headings and points and comments providing the careful advice the minister expected. He'd met Sally Martin, once, at a barbecue; she and Harriet were much the same age (twelve now), had got on well, had played all day; there'd been talk of them getting together, but they never had. Now Harriet, if asked, would hardly recall her; oh yes, the fair-haired girl with the long plaits, yes, she thought she remembered her. Richard didn't at all, there was just a blurred mental snapshot of the two little girls piling stones across a creek to make a dam — or perhaps it was a real photograph, stuck in an album, destined to be the mindless *memorabilia* of another generation.

Yet Richard could not stop picturing that unremembered face, mouth square and gasping, the cord tightening, the dying flesh turning purple...

He felt ashamed when he found himself thinking, thank god Joe Martin isn't actually a friend of mine. A colleague. A giver of dinner

parties dutifully but not quickly returned. What could you offer a friend to comfort such disaster? Such tragedy, really tragedy, pity and terror, not the car accident kind. But not cathartic, not offering any relief like that. When you thought of turning it into a play you saw how unbearable it was. Think of the 17th century finding the death of Cordelia too much to bear, writing in a happy ending; later times knew better, and exulted in the poetry of her death and Lear dying perhaps of joy. But could any art be found to deal with the death of a girl at the hands of her brother? Two children destroyed by a single act, for the boy was lost as surely as his sister, the nuclear family blasted out of existence. And what sort of a life, a world, would have to be created in which such deeds could have their place?

Joe Martin wasn't a friend of his, but he was a colleague ... what could you offer a colleague? The usual words of condolence, the half-mumbled politenesses accepted half-offered, the unbitten coin of grief passed from hand to hand, legal tender and familiar in the palm, never tested ... that would ring false here. Once you could have mentioned God, trusting in the currency of at least lip-service paid to His Will Being Done. Could have shelved the pain and the blame, trusted. But even the church had given up the idea of a Friend for little children above the bright blue sky. And the most ardent faith could well not be comforted by a God who watched over such an event. That was a cliché of course. It was a favourite maxim of his that clichés exist because they are true.

Suppose it were Harriet? Jimmy? He could not bear the thought, had to shrug his shoulders, wriggle his body away from it. And the reality? That was what Joe Martin was facing, not the imagination. Richard's eyes filled with tears. He telephoned Martha, to invoke his children in their mother.

Mrs Ambrose was in class. Did he care to leave a message?

It was Joe Martin he ought to be ringing. Joe who needed help. Or the offer of it. He stretched his hand out to the phone, touched it with his finger. Sat noiselessly and slowly drumming his fingers along the plastic handset. Like a child awkwardly playing scales, trying to make his fingers function.

Perhaps it would be an intrusion. He was not a friend. He might be seen as butting in. Prying. Disturbing the privacy that grief needed.

Or perhaps these scruples were cowardice. An excuse not to do something difficult. His fingers continued to play clumsy silent scales on the slippery plastic of the telephone.

Ring up Joe Martin equals intrusion.

Not ringing up Joe Martin equals cowardice.

He examined these two statements with all the sharpness and subtlety of his mind. And with welling fear. He simply didn't know. Could not by thinking tell.

Perhaps face to face would be better. Made easier (but better? better and easier weren't synonymous) — made more bearable then for both by ... *body language*. Jargon is its own revenge.

It was lunchtime. He stood at his window and watched the joggers streaming out of the building as though drawn by some lemming call to seek a necessary doom. As he leaned his head against the window, staring down at them until they were twinkling bifurcations receding, he caught the shadow of his face in the glass. The silver curve of the spectacles, the pored skin, the dark nose craters.

He rubbed his hands over it. *I come forward pointing to my mask*, said the actor in a Roman play. *Larvatus prodeo*. There was a word in English, *larvate*, it meant masked. Not exactly in common use. In the Roman plays the shapes of the masks were highly exaggerated, so that the audience in the distant heights of an amphitheatre could understand what they signified. That way you knew the actor's role exactly. The romantic notion of sincerity did not apply.

Suppose he and Joe Martin could meet, each wearing the grinning eyeless mask of tragedy, without the need to find in their own feeble faces the lineaments of anguish. Pointing like dancers, powerful and mute. Safe in the formal roles of grief.

He was still trying to take comfort from art. Experience transmuted by a kindly alchemy. In its base form there was none.

The lemmings had gone, well away into the lunch-time's trajectories. Around the lake, under the trees, not seeing the vast public buildings, nor hearing the wind-shredded chimes of the carillon, crossing the bridges, the inimical motorways, finishing the loop back at the office. His brother-in-law Stephen was a keen runner. He reckoned that running altered the consciousness, gave you a high; he perceived the world anew when he ran, he said. Richard, thinking of the grunting and thumping and sweating, found it hard to believe; yet did so. Who knew where grace might be achieved? But he could not resist saying to Stephen that Dr Johnston would certainly have understood:

— You know what he said about hanging, that it concentrates the mind wonderfully? I expect jogging has much the same effect.

And like the runners drawn to doom, he came back to his colleague, his associate, his workmate, and the impossible burden of grief. Impossible to imagine a network of support strong enough to stand that strain.

In the lift that evening he heard a man say:

— Incest of course. Stands to reason. Couldn't be anything else. Not with kids that age.

Richard could see this man's face in the mirror on the lift wall, but the man couldn't, he was speaking from himself unobserved, his self unstolen by reflection. He was grave, and courteous to horror, but smug: he understood. And he was excited. His face in the mirror rippled. Vicarious disaster enlivened his dreary round of days. Richard thought of turning round, of grabbing him by the ear, of slamming his glib head into the mirror, which would shatter into a star pattern, its radiating fragments framing his head like a hellish halo. And the same pattern would bubble in lines of blood through his flesh. Dripping down on to his soft camel coloured overcoat.

He felt sick with the violence of this thought. In the mirror the man rounded his eyes, pursed his lips and shook his head, an image of pained understanding.

— A sort of game, do you see. Would have got out of hand, and ... he sliced his hand across his throat.

Richard didn't know who he was. He hoped he would never see him again.

When he got home Martha was in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for soup. Its spicy warm smell filled the room. He put his arms round her and hugged her, instead of just dabbing her cheek with his lips. Harriet left playing the piano and Jimmy lighting the fire and he hugged them too, feeling their shoulders pushing up under his armpits, the strong thrust of their separate growing.

Martha said, Wow, what have we done to deserve this!

Richard poured himself a large whisky, waved the bottle at Martha.

— God no. I'll stick to wine. Can't afford to wipe out the night.

Harriet fed the cats that were milling underfoot. Martha, red-faced and fuzzy-haired from the steam, dropped the last of the vegetables in the soup. Dinner in 10 minutes, she said.

— Well, what's news? asked Richard. Jimmy brought an essay that had got a high mark. Martha said, The Hoffmans have invited us for dinner. Saturday week.

Vivienne Hoffman was a teacher at Martha's school. They didn't know her very well. Her husband worked in Treasury.

He couldn't tell Martha about Sally Martin yet. Later, when the children were in bed. He thought of not telling her at all, of not having to take on the burden of her horror.

She ladled the soup into shallow bowls that had belonged to her grand-

mother. They were faded pink and worn, beautiful. The family watched, smiling with pleasure. Their four heads bent to drink the soup out of big European spoons. Don't slurp, Martha said to Harriet. Soup should be silent. She passed Richard a blue and white plate with slices of bread. The butter was in a chipped faience bowl that Martha had bought at a Prisunic in Paris, when they were first married. It was really meant for drinking morning coffee.

Perhaps it was all a pretty picture. As frail as cardboard, easily bent or burnt or torn or turned to mush. Surely I can have faith in the stability and security of my life, he thought. He imagined the Martin family, last night, heads bent over the table, eating dinner. The boy proud of a high-marked essay, the girl slurping soup. He didn't actually know how true that picture could be, wasn't close enough to Joe Martin to have seen the forms let along the realities of his life. Could only recall an apparent absence of *Angst*.

He wanted to think that there had been something wrong. He put mustard on a slice of the pickled pork that had made the soup broth, poured red wine. Otherwise, what was he doing to keep chaos at bay? Just depending on luck? Hopefully ... a great anonymous hoper hoping all would be well.

Perhaps he ought to envy the glibness of the man in the lift. A sin, a fault, a label, and the whole incident stored away in some filing cabinet of the brain. To be taken out when some contained contemplation of horror was needed.

— You're quiet, said Martha.

He shook his head like a swimmer surfacing. Tired, he said. Busy day.

After dinner Jimmy came and sat beside him on the sofa with the puzzle, the nonsense word *lebratya* turned into a dozen more nonsense words in his attempt to crack its code.

— It's bloody difficult.

— Pardon?

— It's hard.

— That's the point.

— How about a clue? How about telling me what letter it starts with?

— Well, if I tell you that, it'll make it too easy.

— Huh. No it won't. Just the first letter.

— Has Harriet tried yet?

— What do you think? *She* can't do it.

— You're giving in then?

— No. Just the first letter.

— B.

— Does it end with *ly*?

— No.

— What about *al*!

— Who's doing this puzzle? Any more hints and you'll have the lot.

Jimmy wrote down *b* and *al* with a space between. Harriet looked over his shoulder.

— *Beratyal*. That's a good word. All your own work.

— Shut up, said Jimmy. You couldn't have done it in a thousand fits.

It was funny that an anagram should be so hard. Richard had given it to all sorts of clever people, and they hadn't been able to do it. He regretted he'd never been able to try — he'd known the answer before he started. He liked to think he'd have worked it out, but he'd never know.



# Aritha van Herk

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## INTERVIEW

Gyrid Jerve interviewed Aritha van Herk in Oslo in the autumn of 1985.



*What made you become a writer?*

You want to know what... I am no good at doing anything else. If I have to do a science experiment, it's a flop; if I have to do a math equation, it's a disaster. I can't balance my check book, I can't swim, I can't skate, I can't ski. I am no good at doing anything except reading and writing. When I was a little kid, the only thing I was good at was reading, and I wanted to get a job where I could make my living reading books.

*Did your parents encourage you to read?*

Yes, they did, but they were also trying to persuade me that I ought to go outside and play and that I ought to wash the dishes, or chase the cows, *instead* of reading. I was one of those kids who was walking outside holding a book, or washing the dishes with one hand in the dishwater and the other holding a book. It's true, I am no good at anything else.

*Why did you start writing your own stories?*

I think I always wrote stories because I was dissatisfied with the stories I read. I talk about that in one of my papers, 'Space and Landscape: A Personal Mapping'. I was reading stories that were about British kids and American kids and it was totally alien to my experience. So I wanted to tell my own kind of story. I think I also wanted to write stories because I wanted to tell lies and get away with it.

*Do you have a message in your stories?*

I write first of all because I want to tell a good story, and I don't have any other ulterior motive. The story is its own motive. I don't want to provide people with entertainment, although I think my stories are entertaining. I don't set out to prophesize, or to convince people of something either. I don't decide that I'm going to write a novel that's going to persuade men that they are incompetent and that they need a woman to rescue them. I *never* work that way. I think my main drive is always the story, the quality of the story, the strength of the story, the seduction of the story. Much more so than trying to convert everyone to feminism.

*You are feminist, though?*

Well, I see life that way. But I am first of all a writer.

*William French in The Globe and Mail wrote in a book review on Judith that he had to cross his legs when he was reading about Judith castrating the pigs. Other critics have said that you hate men. What are your comments?*

Do I look like a man-hater to you? I like men very much, but I'm totally aware of their faults, and that makes them really nervous. It's very strange because men have been writing about bad women for a long time, and we've always accepted it. Now women are writing stories

about men who aren't always perfect, and they're really nervous about it. I think they expect women writers to create male heroes who are harlequin men, you know those tall, dark, handsome men that you are waiting for to sweep you off your feet. No, I don't hate men, but I have a pretty acute eye for their faults. That's a personal trait of mine. But I'm also interested in fictionalizing the angry woman. I'm tired of the woman who says — oh everyone's mean to me, I'm a victim, I'm a victim. I like tough women, women who can act. I'm also interested in the woman as a trickster figure, women who can trick to get what they want. That fascinates me.

*You said somewhere that the main difference between your women and Margaret Atwood's women is that your women are less victims.*

Well, I think her new women are getting less victims. But maybe she's more of a realistic writer than I am. I mean in real life women are often very passive. I think she does rely on realism, whereas I'm kind of interested in showing female characters that are images of what women can do, the possibilities of the world. And I don't apologize for them not being realistic. OK, maybe there aren't many women like Judith or J.L., but they're still kind of fun to have around. We need more of them.

*Arachne, the protagonist in your latest book is one of them, isn't she?*

Oh, she's even worse. She's really bad. She kidnaps a man and she uses men like toilet paper. I'm tired of women who are only good and I'd like to write a novel about a woman who is a terrorist...

*It sounds like your fourth novel will be quite different from the first three though.*

It's different now, but who knows what could happen to it. But I do see those first three novels as a kind of trilogy, of three tough and unusual women who are making their way in the world sort of thing. The real question is really: how do you survive as a contemporary woman in a contemporary world?

*Have you found women like your fictional ones in literature by other women?*

Sure. In Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Margaret Drabble. It's a tradition.

*Your women are quite different from the traditional women in Canadian literature, though.*

Yes, you see there has been this tendency to put the female character into one of three categories: the mother, the saint, or the whore. These repetitive images are so often imposed on women, and I want my female characters to break out of those stereotypes. And I think I am following in a tradition of women's writing in Canada that is very strong. Those stereotypes are getting blown apart. Look at Constance Beresford Howe's *The Book of Eve*. The old woman who is a bag lady, she refuses to be a mother and she refuses to be a saint, and as for being a whore, well, bag ladies aren't whores, bag ladies are just bag ladies. Right? And all these other new female characters that are beginning to appear are marvellous. It's the possibilities of the female character that give it strength.

*Do you think there is a difference between men and women writers?*

Yes because women experience things differently from men. I think women are more interested in language instead of content. The language is the female's muse. I think men's fiction concentrates on plot, whereas women are more interested in mythology and fairytales.

*You use a lot of mythology in your novels. Why do you do that?*

There are two reasons. First of all, the myths are the most important reservoir of stories that we have. You see every story has really been told before, and all we can do is to retell it. That's why language is so important. The other reason is that I want to retell stories that have been almost lost. A lot of stories about women have been neglected, for instance the stories of Judith and Jael. I'm sure most people have never heard of Jael. She was a peasant woman who was tired of all the noise and the war and she said to hell with it. She just wanted peace and to go on with her life. That's why she killed Sisera. She did things out of necessity, and she acted then and there to save her children. The story in the Bible is quite clear, but Biblical scholars have had a marvellous time with it. Read the criticism! It says that she's a traitor and a murderess, and that she only wanted to get even with Sisera. Even though her violent action brought about forty years of peace, and it gave them time to rejuvenate. If you're a man like Samson who has committed fifty murders,

you'll still get lauded as a hero. If you're a woman, you are a villain. That's typical of our male-dominated society, and that kind of attitude makes me furious... The story of Deborah is also a wonderful story. She was a judge, even above the general... I think it's important that we don't forget these stories. We must regain them as the core of our mythology, and the best way to do this is to use them in a contemporary way, to give them a contemporary perspective.

*How is it to be a woman writer in Canada?*

We have a very strong tradition of women writers in Canada. It goes back to Gabrielle Roy, Sheila Watson, Ethel Wilson and Margaret Laurence. Those women have been writing for thirty, forty years. It's a good tradition, and a wonderful one to be in. You know that those women have gone ahead first and they have contributed to the good response to Canadian literature by women. And for some reason there is no competition between us, whereas that is really different from the men. We all talk about each other and we help each other.

*It seems like the most famous Canadian writers are women. At least the ones we hear about in Norway are women.*

It's a strange phenomenon in Canada. I think it's because in the beginning men had to be out there doing physical things, and the intellectual life was left for women. Women are the ones who read books, and if you are a woman and you are going to buy a book, who are you going to buy, Alice Munro or Rudy Wiebe? You're going to buy Alice Munro. The only thing about it is that even though the best writers in Canada are women, they get fewer writers in residence than the men. They also get fewer grants, and their books get fewer reviews. There are reports on this. It's very unequal. The world is a very male-oriented place. So even though the women are more famous, they get less attention here in Canada than the men. With some exceptions of course, but on the average.

*Maybe one of the reasons is that most of the professors are men?*

That's right. They determine academic taste which again determines prosperity, who gets taught. That's why it is so important that more women start working within the academic world as well.

*You have said that you have been influenced by e.g. Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence and Marian Engel. When there are so many Canadian woman writers, isn't it hard not to 'steal' from each other?*

That's like a film man who says I don't want to go to a movie because I might be influenced. You see, you always tell your own story. Fiction is like a world. One house is never like another house. If you go into somebody else's house and you see a mirror, you may want to put a mirror in your own house, but it will never be the same because your house is different. It's again like the translation of personal experience. You translate it in a different way. Even though two writers use the same object or device, or even the same kind of person, it will never be the same. That's the wonderful thing about fiction. It's so idiosyncratic.

*Some critics have claimed that your novels are too autobiographical. What do you think of that?*

How do they know?

*Well, you were born and raised on a farm like Judith, and you have worked as a bushcook in the Yukon like J.L. And you're married to a geologist.*

That is of course based on the assumption that everything that happens to my characters has happened to me.

*So what happened to J.L. and Judith did not happen to you...*

No. I just used the settings, that's all. You write about what you know because that is territory you are familiar with. But that doesn't mean that you are writing about yourself. The self takes a back seat when the narrative voice takes over. This is something that people that are not writers don't understand very well. There is a real separation between the person who is Aritha van Herk, or who is any writer, and the narrative persona that steps in and begins to work on a story. The writer is different from the person. Even though you may use things that you know, or things that have happened to you, by the time they come out on paper, they have gone through your head, and through the artist's head, and they are completely altered. There is no one-to-one relationship to reality. It's fiction.

*I think that is hard to understand for the reader, and especially when the novel is written in the first person narrative like The Tent Peg. It's easy to think that the I-person is the author.*

But that means that I could be any one of those thirteen men too. Why don't people assume that?

*Was it difficult to write from a man's perspective?*

It was very hard. It was the most difficult thing I've ever done. I had to think like a man. I had to think like *thirteen* men. And I had to work them all through my head enough so that I could have written a whole novel about each one of them simply in order to do those little pieces. Sure it was hard. I was terrified, but it didn't stop me from doing it.

*Did you have to go around and watch men?*

Well, I always watch men anyway...

*Do you feel closer to your female characters than to your male ones?*

Characters are funny things because they take on a life of their own. You see I never liked Judith very much. I tried to make her nicer, but I couldn't because she kept refusing to do what I wanted her to do. She was mad, and she was mean, and she was bad-tempered and over-reactive. You may not necessarily like the characters that you write about. And I like Thompson and Mackenzie in many ways better than any other of the characters in the novels. I like those two men, and I think it probably shows. J.L. I feel is a bit distant. She's distant from me too, even though I understand her, and even though she is a woman. But just because she is a woman doesn't mean that that's my point of view. Probably I'm closest to Thompson.

*Do you think it's more difficult to write about men than to write about women?*

I think it's just more dangerous. Writing is so difficult anyway.

*Are you afraid of being attacked by critics?*

No, I don't care what people say. When you write a novel you do it for the novel, and you ignore what people would do to you. If you thought about it, none of us would have the nerve to put a word down on paper.

*In your first draft of Judith, the novel was told from the pigs' point of view. Did the publisher make you change this?*

The publisher was really nervous about the pigs telling the story, so they asked me to change it to the third person. But anyone who reads the novel carefully knows that the narrator is still the pigs. I actually think this is better because if I had continued to use the collective narrative voice of the pigs, it would have drawn so much attention to itself that the readers would have been uneasy and thrown off-guard. And as it stands now, I'm very happy with it because the perceptive reader is aware of the pigs' voice behind the narration, the unperceptive readers aren't aware of it, and it doesn't bother them. So I've killed two birds with one stone, and that's what a good novel should do. It should work on all kinds of levels.

*Where do you find inspiration to write?*

Inspiration doesn't work for me at all. I work on the theory that you sit down every morning and you make yourself work for three hours and then you can stop. It's hard work.

*What makes you do it then?*

I don't know, why does any writer write? I think part of it is that wish to have a story that goes on longer than the story of your life. I think writers really want to be remembered. They want to leave something lasting behind.

*You told your class that you got the idea to write Judith from the memory of a middle-aged woman pig farmer in the community where you grew up. The female protagonist of No Fixed Address sells underwear. Where did you get that idea from?*

Well, I wanted to write a novel about a woman who was a picaro, a travelling person, and I needed to give her an occupation. So I thought about what occupation travels. You see writing is a very logical business.



You need this, so you better go and think about that... There aren't very many travelling salesmen any more, and I went into a little squadstore in Tofino, B.C., and I asked if they got any travelling salesmen around there. You see that's quite remote. And the woman who runs the store said to me, no she said, they all work by phone. But, she said, the underwear-salesman comes twice a year. That's it. I mean, it's like a gift. I knew she had to sell underwear. What else was there to sell...

*You have told your class that they shouldn't believe in everything you say because you are a liar.*

It's the rule of the game. I must always lie!

Dangaroo Press will publish Aritha van Herk's collection of ficto-criticism, *The Frozen Tongue*, in 1988.

# Herb Barrett

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## NEW CANADIAN HAIKU

On the Canadian Shield  
Gouged by glaciers  
Tree roots cling to granite

Tundra spring —  
Exotic flowers leap  
From permafrost

First mild morning —  
I shovel winter  
From my doorstep

Autumn leaves rising in a column of smoke

Still vivid  
This dull autumn day —  
The last petunias

Brief summer shower —  
Clinging to the grass  
Quivering insect wings

Spring in the Arctic —  
Return of the geese  
And a Cruise missile

Congratulations to Herb Barrett who has just won second place in the Poetry Society of Japan's Third International Haiku Contest.

# David L. Benson

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## SUDDEN DEATH OVER TIME

I don't even know her name  
but she was a Blagdon  
or at least she married one  
before that  
she wore  
her mother's husband's name  
as was their fashion  
and still is ours  
She was a Boxey woman  
made fish  
tended the turnips  
kept sheep  
like her mother  
and her mother's mother  
and so on  
back through the fog  
of history  
and to places uncharted  
in Great Bay de L'Eau  
Worked like a dog  
keeping up  
her half of the fishery  
Steady go  
from making splits  
to trimming the lamps  
and all between  
when the men  
were away  
dying in dories  
she was preparing  
more to die

Got killed herself  
after that  
going up  
to feed the sheep  
one night  
when the rain  
was driving in over Breakheart  
and the thunder  
rolling hard over  
the black water  
somewhere near Sagona  
went as she lived  
in a hurry  
struck dead b' lightning  
age 93  
a great, great woman  
my great, great grandmother.

## FATHER'S CROWD

Wandering the wind  
torn naked headland  
below the Devil's  
footstool  
touching the past  
in low stone walls  
that wind through  
this Connemara  
with wooden houses  
wondering  
and the gall  
of a people  
who chose  
this open harbour  
west of Baccalieu  
and the barren  
islands further north

to make their fish  
and hunt for birds  
and seals in the Spring  
places they thought  
they have been forever  
probably waving  
in silence  
to Cartier  
and Gilbert  
as they passed  
and to the frustrated  
Guy  
searching almost in vain  
for a vacant cove  
to found his first  
English colony.  
They were English  
too  
some of them  
fishermen  
sealers  
gunners  
floaters  
down on the Labrador  
each year  
or beating a lead  
through the Ice  
at the Front  
in search  
of the Main Patch  
or taking  
pretentious  
Yankees  
Canadians  
and Englishmen  
to the top  
and bottom of the world  
or going out  
to find them  
when they went  
on their own

and got themselves lost  
in the white Hell.  
Forever sailing  
but always returning  
to the bleak harbours  
of desolation  
isolation  
and death  
they called home  
Newell's Island  
Ship Island  
Offer Gooseberry  
Swain's Tickle  
Greenspond  
The Grates.  
Stories still  
are told  
of the islands  
and the women  
and men  
and vessels  
and the desperate  
fearless insanity  
in bringing in  
the broken  
two and three masted  
wrecks  
from the Ice  
or the October gales  
carrying the great wealth  
in which  
they never shared  
to build fine homes  
in cities  
they never saw.

# John B. Lee

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## HOLY ECDESEIST BATMAN

it's not erotic  
the stripper  
rubbing her crotch  
against the stage  
at Hanners  
dead eyes  
a doll's eyes

she wants it  
about as much  
as she wants  
a wood screw  
torqued into her skull.

I have no illusions  
of taking her  
away from all this  
even though she may be bright  
a street poet an artist  
secretly a virtuoso on the oboe  
working her way through medical school  
for she is not really here  
her most intimate sensibilities  
detached  
by some hurt  
her body moving unmoved  
sexless and plastic.

## NO CONTACT HOCKEY

we cure  
the firehall blues  
with booze

after we've hung our skates to dry  
like ripe skins

we talk about accidents  
checks  
slashed faces eyes carved out of skull's knot holes  
or how one year  
Al saw a boy die on the ice  
his jugular cut  
and pumping red

but mostly we talk about scoring  
the easy grace  
in the best of us  
swivelling into perfection  
only then  
when the puck arcs past a shoulder  
or slides cool and swift  
along the ice  
to tangle in the netting  
like a hard black fish  
that darts of its own accord.

we get drunk  
on victory  
smashed  
on defeat  
and when we go home to our wives  
tired drained with the telling  
of the same stories  
in as many ways as we can conjure  
we go with the knowledge  
that we will pay dearly tomorrow  
for the glory  
we hooked  
tonight.



# Roots of African Drama: Critical Approaches and Elements of Continuity

In most discussions and essays on contemporary African drama and theatre the emphases by writers and critics appear to be focussed on areas of general criticism, autobiographical evidence and ideological content of the plays. No emphasis is placed on their performance context. While these approaches have their advantages, there is the temptation of studying African drama in isolation from its basic roots and inspiration, that is, its indigenous roots. Because of the peculiar nature of contemporary African drama and theatre, by this I mean that it is relatively new and, more importantly, it is a product of two cultures — African and European — an attempt to discuss it using modern criteria would not only create stereotypes but also a superficial understanding, especially among non-African critics and dramatists.

Therefore, there is a need for a study of the historical and social traditions that gave birth to contemporary African drama and theatre. It means that we have to study these indigenous forms as well as their transitional phases during the colonial and post-colonial eras. This paper attempts an appraisal of the critical approaches which have influenced the development of African drama and theatre; examples of three indigenous festivals are discussed to buttress these approaches. In the second part, two plays, Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) and 'Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* (1974), are discussed as examples of plays showing elements of continuity between the indigenous dramatic and theatrical traditions and contemporary traditions. The conclusion supports a more forthright and functional use of traditional materials by modern African playwrights and theatre practitioners.

There are broadly four critical approaches<sup>1</sup> to the nature of African drama and theatre. These are (1) The Colonial Approach (Herskovits, Talbot, Ruth Finnegan and Kirby et al.), (2) The Evolutionary, (3) The

Divine Approach, (4) The Relativistic Approach. In this paper I shall avoid the first approach; my reasons for this, especially regarding the approaches of Herskovits, Talbot, Ruth Finnegan et al., are firstly that they are Euro-American and therefore inadequate for appreciating or assessing African drama. Secondly, they fail to appreciate the social and historical processes which have informed Euro-American, albeit that other literatures are different from the African experience. Thirdly, they fail to appreciate that despite the advent of modern societies in the African diaspora, the continuous influence of the oral tradition on most African communities is very strong. The European anthropologist Ruth Finnegan, writing in the late fifties and early sixties, notes:

How far one can speak of indigenous drama in Africa is not an easy question.... Though some writers have very positively affirmed the existence of native African drama, it would perhaps be truer to say that in Africa, in contrast to West Europe and Asia, drama is not typically a widespread or developed form.<sup>2</sup>

Her evidence for this is that she could not detect those familiar elements which in her words 'in the wide sense, we normally regard as drama'. She continues: 'Most important is the idea of enactment, or representation through actors who imitate persons and events ... linguistic content, plot; the represented interaction of several characters; specialized scenery, etc.; often music — and of particular importance in most African performance — dance.'<sup>3</sup> However, she agrees that, 'certain dramatic and quasi-dramatic phenomena can be found, particularly in parts of West Africa — perhaps, the celebrated masquerades of southern Nigeria'.<sup>4</sup> This type of attitude or approach to African drama and theatre either reveals the ignorance of the writer of the culture concerned, or represents a calculated attempt by the critic to create stereotypes or misrepresent a virile and sustaining dramatic and theatrical tradition. Hence, the duty of the contemporary African critic and dramatist is to put such misconception and criticism in perspective through an emphasis on the historical and social aspects of African drama and theatre.

I now turn to our three broad categories of critical approaches mentioned earlier in this paper. The evolutionary approach postulates that drama in Africa developed from man's need to control and dominate the natural and unforeseen forces that co-inhabit the world around him. Through ritual propitiation and sacrifices, which evoke elements of magic and spiritual possession, man dominates and empathises with the repressive and unpredictable forces of nature. With time, festivals which are the culmination of these rites become the unit of joyous celebrations (as well as an occasion for social and communal integration) against the

capricious forces that seek to annihilate him. The protagonists of this view draw examples from classical Greece, Asian and Japanese cultures to buttress their contention.<sup>5</sup> From the argument of the evolutionary theorists, folklore, legends, myths and history become sources for dramatic and theatrical presentation. The central point in the evolutionary approach is the influence of religion on the development of African drama, and this point cannot be over-emphasised. J.C. de Graft, the late Ghanaian playwright and scholar, draws attention to this important relationship when he says:

It is to the early twilight zone of this middle region that many forms of ritual drama observable in many African traditional societies seem to me to belong — ritual dramas through which the participants seek such desired effects as social solidarity, or through which they attempt to reaffirm, keep alive, or commemorate such facts, beliefs, relationships, and attitudes as the community considers vital to its sanity and continued healthy existence.<sup>6</sup>

Closely analogous to the evolutionary approach is the Divine approach identified by Dr Atiboroko Uyovbukerhi,<sup>7</sup> a Nigerian scholar and dramatist: The divine approach traces the origin of drama to a divine force or spirit power. Usually a human being by some inexplicable circumstances is abducted by a diety. Upon his freedom, he brings along with him the secrets, dance steps and songs of his divine abductors. *The Ohworhu* theatre, in the Evwreni and *Uwherun* clans of the Urhobo tribe in Bendel State and the Ekine plays of the Ijaw make such claims. Another good example is the *Ame* (water) festival theatre at Sapele in Bendel State of Nigeria. In the case of the Ekine theatre, Ekineba, a lady was said to have been abducted by the water deity who taught her the *Ekine* dramatic form. Upon her release she brought and taught her people the dramatic forms of the water deity and they have been performing it ever since.<sup>8</sup>

In the example of the *Ame* festival theatre at Sapele,<sup>9</sup> Mrs C.A. Oyoyo, the founder of the society also called *Ughegbe* or *Orhuerakpor Ughegbe*, was said to have been a successful businesswoman; one day she fell into a trance and was instructed by the goddess Olokun, or mermaid, to form the society in order to serve and heal the afflicted. In her trance, she was given spiritual powers, and taught the dance and songs of Olokun. Since then she has expanded what was hitherto a family affair into a world-wide 'society' with a strong theatrical bias.

The influence of these basic religious and ritual rites on contemporary drama and theatre are enormous and varied, and these will be discussed in the second part of this paper. The divine approach to African drama exclusively draws from myths, and like the evolutionary approach it has a

strong religious overtone. The credibility of both approaches is that they are based on concrete events and personalities of the community that gave rise to them. Also, apart from the religious content of such dramas, they allow for secularisation and entertainment as later Ekine and Yoruba theatre has shown.<sup>10</sup>

A third prevalent approach to traditional African drama using Nigerian examples is the relativistic approach;<sup>11</sup> the protagonists of this approach are Emmanuel Obiechina and Ossie Enekwe, both Nigerian scholars and dramatists. On the surface, the relativists are in no way in disagreement with possible religious (evolutionary) and mythic origins of African drama. Their bone of contention rather lies in the form, content, and interpretation of traditional forms of drama. They argue that any interpretative approach and aesthetic standards should be based on the merits and demerits of African drama. Contrary to the evolutionary view put forward by Michael Echeruo, they argue that indigenous forms with their religious and ritual content must not necessarily follow 'identical linear development of the classical Greek drama from the Dionysian and Apollonian festival. This is because Africa has a history and culture that are different from those of the Greek.'<sup>12</sup>

The good thing about the relativistic view is that it calls for an objective critical approach to African drama. Far from being another kind of pan-Africanist propaganda, it calls for aesthetic and critical standards that are not alien to the African experience. I feel any critical approach to African drama and theatre should take cognisance of the influence of the indigenous forms that have influenced and will continue to influence contemporary drama and theatre: the variety in the content of indigenous festivals must be seen in relation to contemporary setting, thematic content, dance forms, music and language etc. It is only in this sense that one can speak of continuity between traditional forms and contemporary drama and theatre. As Emmanuel Obiechina observes:

Is there any particular reason except that of meeting the specifically practical pressures of the present age, why an enactment should last only two or three hours instead of six months? Is the sense of organic unity which we assume in the modern theatre and its conventions not possible on an extended scale among a people whose sensibilities are trained to absorb more diffused ritual and symbolic significance of action? Is a broad communal canvas not more suitable for painting more inclusive social and emotional action than the mere mouse-tongue platform called the modern stage?<sup>13</sup>

In traditional African society the festival was and is still the nucleus of communal religious worship and also an occasion for artistic displays and

dramatic enactment. Because of its varied content and functions, the festival has often been seen as a loose phenomenon, elusive in meaning and significance. At best most critics appreciate it only in its religious context. These erroneous attitudes misrepresent the rich and cultural values of African festivals. A study of these festivals should reveal the story behind them, their functions, dramatic and theatrical aspects, which in the main have influenced contemporary playwriting and theatrical practice. Oyin Ogunba, a Nigerian dramatist, emphasises this point: 'In traditional Africa, the great artistic institution is the festival. Contrary to popular understanding the festival is not just a religious occasion; if it were, it would hardly command more than a tiny fraction of the interest it generates among the people.'<sup>14</sup>

Thus, if one must speak of a continuum between indigenous forms and contemporary dramatic and theatrical practice in Africa, it is imperative that we take cognisance of the role and functions of festivals in African communities, both in the past and in the present. The influence of the ritual and socio-cultural aspects of most African festivals on the contemporary drama and theatre is enormous and varied and will be discussed in the second part of this paper.

However, one can discern elements of secularisation in some extant indigenous festivals, especially those geared toward entertainment and moral instruction; others still retain those functional aspects that seek to integrate the community, 'keep alive or commemorate such facts, beliefs, and attitudes vital to the community in which they are still celebrated'. Three examples will now be discussed.

The *Ame* festival or Olokun or Igbe (literally 'water festival') mentioned earlier is intrinsically a water cult dedicated to the worship of Olokun — water mermaid, 'mammy water' etc., the goddess of the sea. According to the accounts of the festival as celebrated by the Ughegbe Society at Sapele, Bendel State of Nigeria, Mrs C.A. Oyoyo, a once successful businesswoman, was visited by Olokun in her sleep. She was instructed to give up her job and dedicate her life to caring for the afflicted. Literally she became the representative of Olokun on earth. In all her appearances, whether in the context of religious worship or during the annual celebrations, she depicts the true image and qualities of the goddess herself. She has taught her followers not only how to worship the goddess but also the songs, music and dance movements of the water spirits.

Annually between March and April, the followers of the *Ughegbe* Society gather to celebrate its founding. The venue is an open arena specially prepared for the festival. The content of the festival is as varied

and loosely structured as in most other indigenous forms. However, behind its loose structure and varied activities one can see its coherent form. The rituals performed in the shrines are geared toward placating the goddess; in the same vein the group expect a reciprocal action from the goddess in the form of financial reward, fertility among the women folk, good health and peace on earth.

Short dramatic pieces are enacted during the celebration. For example, when I witnessed the celebrations in 1982 (March/April), the drama performed centred around a sick woman who is destined to serve the goddess. Because the parents are Christians the child could not fulfil her role on earth. However, on the eve of her marriage she falls ill; when all other sources fail to cure her, the Olokun priestess is called in. She prays and performs the necessary rituals which eventually cures the lady. Thereafter it was a happy ending for the couple and the community. Such dramatic sketches are geared toward moral and religious instruction. Apart from improvised dramatic performances, other cultural activities geared toward entertainment include masquerade dances, group singing and general merriment.

The *Ame* festival is a good example of a ritual festival which provides a rich dramatic and theatrical experience. The aesthetic values discernible from the whole performance highlight the world view of the community. Moreover, the celebration is not restricted to members of the group but is open to all comers.

## THE OHUVWE FESTIVAL DRAMA AT ABRAKA

Among the Abraka-Urhobo community in Bendel State, Nigeria, the *Ohuvwe* festival is an annual celebration held around May to commemorate their victory against the incessant onslaught of the royal army from Benin during the sixteenth century. Officially the festival lasts for two weeks.

The highlight of the festival includes the worship of *Uvwuwe*, their ancestral god who, as the story goes, protected the people of Abraka against the superior warriors from Benin. Before the official proclamation of the beginning of the festival various meetings take place among the two sections that make up the Abraka community — the *Oruarivie* which is made up of four quarters, namely Uruoka, Urhuogo, Urhuevie and Ekrejeta, and the Unuawha section made up of Oria and Umeghe quarters. Before the commencement of the festival proper the chief priest performs and organises pre-festival ritual observances as well as ensures

a hitch-free celebration and the building of the festival arena. The main activity of the first week is the hunting of animals, with specific emphasis on the *Ovie* (Duiker). There are two possible reasons why the hunters search for the *Ovie*: the *Ovie* is the king of antelopes and therefore the ability to bring the animal back alive proves the hunting prowess of the hunters; however, other sources claim that the *Ovie*, which literally translated means 'slave' in the Urhobo language, symbolises the capture of the enemy, thus representing and enacting the defeat of the Benin warriors by their ancestral fathers.

The return of the hunters from the forest is the beginning of the second week of the festival. Various hunting groups accompanied by members of village wards march in the different processions heading for the village square en route to the king's palace. Smoked meat dangling from spears or stretched on tree trunks and some in containers well displayed for everybody to see creates in the people a general sense of joy and excitement. In war-like procession led by the elders of the various groups they sing and dance through the various festival routes to the village square. At the king's palace, the leader of the hunting expedition narrates to the king their experiences in the forest. A successful expedition, usually marked by the number of duikers and other animals, is an indication of a good festival and a prosperous year ahead. This means that the gods have accepted their sacrifices and libations. The king on behalf of the community accepts the gifts of the hunters and is carried to the main shrine near the Ohuvwe stream.

A more vibrant and entertaining aspect of the second week are the mock battles fought among imaginary enemies. Turn by turn, which incidentally have been arranged to coincide with the distance from the different villages to the market square, the different warring groups from the surrounding villages sing and dance into the arena; the market or village square is an open air arena with a central clearing. While there is no strict demarcation between the performers and the audience it is not difficult to ascertain who are performers and who are spectators. Having said that, it is also not uncommon to find performers hanging around the audience — this is usually the case when the performers are either taking some time off or attempting to involve the spectators.

The symbolic enactment of the defeat of the Binis takes the form of mock fights, actual body whipping between the various groups and individual participants. The interesting aspects of these mock-fights are the clash of cutlasses and whips made from animal skin or local fibres. Sometimes the fights are so fierce that non-initiates or visitors are advised to keep their distance from the main fighting arena.

The dramatic and theatrical relevance of the *Ohuvwe* festival is immense. The festival centres around the defeat of the royal army from Benin; participants at the festival bear this victory in mind. They approach and enact the mock-battles with all the strength in them, and at times the spectator is carried away and tempted into believing that the whole performance is real. The songs, dances and cultural displays are executed to perfection. The ritual ceremonies are an attempt to commune with their gods and ancestors. In this regard the king, chief priest and members of the community believe that by worshipping the gods and their ancestors in the proper way, peace, fertility and wealth are guaranteed for the future. Also, the symbolic exorcism carried out by the women group wards off evil from the community and protects the people against their enemies.

The social and cultural aspects of the festival embody aesthetic values of the community; for instance the various spectacular costumes that can be seen during the festival, apart from serving as a reminder and a portrayal of their rich tradition, also create in the audience a sense of beauty and belonging. Also, apart from the weird and bizarre costumes of the warriors and hunters, other participants dress in gorgeous traditional costumes befitting the occasion. The men tie very big wrappers, six or eight yards long, round the waist with big shirts to match; beads are freely hung on the neck. The women tie two wrappers, two and three yards long, round the waist, properly adorned with beads or gold chains with the appropriate colours of a small blouse to match the wrapper.

## THE INE FESTIVAL AT OGWASHI-UKU

The Ogwashi-Uku people are Ibo-speaking Bendelites and inhabit the eastern part of the Niger river in Nigeria. The *Ine* festival is held in August and September of every year to mark the harvesting season, and also to commemorate the founding of the Obishop title in Ogwashi-Uku land. The Obi uses the occasion to consolidate and affirm his powers over the kingdom.

The historical origins of the festival speak of the need for a ruler around the sixteenth century who will bring the people together and harness the resources of the land. After solving the riddle from the Oba of Benin a woman called Odu became the first Obi of Ogwashi-Uku and her instrument of office was the mace. During the celebration of the *Ine* festival a cardinal aspect of the occasion is the display of the mace.



Before the festival proper, the Obi spends about seven days in isolation in his palace praying and meditating over the problems of the community. Ritual propitiations are performed in various shrines for the benevolence of the gods. The various wards that make up Ogwashi-Uku make elaborate preparations for the festival — dances, songs, mock-battles and short dramatic sketches are informally rehearsed for the occasion. The mock-fights centre on the past heroic exploits of their forebears; the songs and dances are profusely drawn and adapted from the repertoire of the community.

The dramatic sketches are contemporary and comic in nature. The themes are drawn from the social, economic and moral aspects of the community; for example the themes include 'a man riding his bicycle to the farm. The relationship between a teacher and his pupils, where the pupils are the different parts of the male and female sex organs; and indictment against unacceptable behaviour.'<sup>15</sup>

As in most other performances of this nature the subjects and themes are not explored to the full; the performers highlight the theme and through indirect reference the audience articulates the message because they are familiar with the subject. Also because the action and songs are repeated time and time again in various ways the message is communicated without boring the audience. The spontaneity of the action encourages the audience to chip in and be involved in the performance. The goal is to make people laugh, and the performers use gestures, facial expression and songs to reach the audience and make the whole production a communal affair.

The *Ine* festival, like the other two festivals discussed in this paper, embodies all the elements that are present in most indigenous forms; it is loose in structure and flexible in form. Improvisation plays a major role during its celebration. In all respects it portrays and articulates the artistic and religious life of the community where it is celebrated. These qualities in indigenous festivals have influenced and will continue to influence contemporary drama and theatre and other literary forms in Africa. Playwrights working within the ambit of the traditional festival have not only borrowed its form and structure, but also its language and theatre craft (J.P. Clark, Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'Zulu Sofola and others).

Despite the immense influence of western drama and theatre practice on contemporary African drama, especially in the late nineteen fifties and the first half of the sixties, there has been a radical departure from imitating, as it were, the great western dramatists. This is not so much because of the rise of forthright criticism but more from a conscious need

to return to their traditional roots. Most African playwrights and theatre practitioners (Femi Osofison, 'Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka and others) have through their works sought to use both the traditional and contemporary aspects of their people to portray man in perspective.

Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*<sup>16</sup> (1960) and 'Zulu Sofola's *King Emene*<sup>17</sup> (1974) are two plays that embody the notion of continuity between indigenous festival drama and contemporary drama and theatre at different levels. The former, through its complexity in characterisation and form, portrays the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in a socio-religious and political order that seeks communal harmony; a community bedevilled by corruption and immorality, yet seeks redemption through an equally corrupt and inept leadership. The latter (*King Emene*), through its simple and straightforward rendition of a rebellious act committed by an inexperienced king, articulates the line of demarcation between a tradition shrouded in riddles and proverbs, and modern ideas of self-preservation and politics. Both plays explore the indigenous repertoire of music, language and theatre-craft in an attempt to mirror man for all time. Though both plays are written in English, one discovers a subtle attempt by both playwrights to translate their indigenous language into English. Both plays, and especially *A Dance of the Forests*, are rich in proverbs, riddles and praise songs — everyday tools common in most indigenous African languages. Also, it is no coincidence that both plays use an occasion of a festival celebration to unfold their themes.

*A Dance of the Forests* was written as part of the Nigerian Independence celebrations in October 1960. In this regard, it represents what Eldred Jones aptly describes as 'the complexities of the human personality and its consequences within the cyclical pattern of history.'<sup>18</sup> However, it goes further than a mere journey into human history; through its complex plot and characterisation the play combines elements of history, myth and metaphysics in its attempt to define man's relationship with the forces of nature. Using his Yoruba cosmology, Soyinka turns *A Dance of the Forests* not only into a drama of the gods and spirits but also the play becomes a platform, a mirror, as it were, in which man sees himself in perspective.

*A Dance of the Forests* begins as an occasion for the 'Gathering of the Tribes' and the human community requests their forest neighbours to send illustrious ancestors to grace the occasion. In a dramatic twist, the gods send two spirits (Dead Man and Woman) of the restless dead; predictably the human community rejects these cursed spirits. In another typical Soyinkean twist, the human rejection of Dead Man and Woman takes the principal characters, Adenebi, Demokey and Rola, into a series

of spiritual and metaphysical journeys where their misdeeds in past reincarnations are exposed by equally guilty spiritual acolytes of Forest Head — Aroni, Murete, Esuoro and Ogun. At the end of the play, the human representatives do not appear to have gained or changed from the arduous spiritual experience, although some characters appear temporally chastened, especially Rola. Demoke, the hero, tries in vain towards the end of the play to bring 'into existence the frustrated potential of history, as well as the repeatedly still-born child himself'. However, he fails in this last act of heroism:

MURETE: Come back later. I have told you, the forest is big and I pay no heed to the footsteps of the dead.

AGBOREKO: Murete, if the hunter loses his quarry, he looks up to see where the vultures are circling. Proverb to bones and silence.

MURETE: All right, all right. Come back later. I may have learnt something then.

[*Agboreko sighs, goes. Murete pops up, looks after him.*]

MURETE: [*Mimicking*] Proverb to bones and silence. Somehow I couldn't bear him today. That is Aroni's influence. He spoils everything.

[*Reaches for the pot and takes a deep draught. Enter Ogun who holds the pot against his mouth and forces him to drink the lot at once. Ogun then takes him and turns him quickly round and round. Murete staggers about, quite drunk and unbalanced.*] (p. 14)

In exploring the Yoruba mythology Soyinka draws on ritual prototypes and the major characters assume archetypal roles. For example, Demoke, the hero in *A Dance of the Forests*, is Ogun's surrogate; he exhibits in his actions and speeches both the destructive and creative qualities of Ogun, the Yoruba god of iron and war. Orile, Eshuoro's surrogate (a capricious god with a knack for vengeance) is beheaded by Demoke at Ogun's instance when the former tries to spite the latter while carving the tribe's totem for the celebration. This act sparks off a crisis in the spirit world. Eshuoro is annoyed both by the act of wilful destruction by Demoke and, worse still, by Demoke's destruction of Eshuoro's symbol on earth — the Oro tree — under the guidance of Ogun. In his moment of anger, Eshuoro says:

Demoke, son and son to carvers, who taught you  
How you impale me, abuse me! Scratching my shame  
To the dwellers of hell where  
The womb-snake shudders and the world is set on fire.  
Demoke, did you know? Mine is the tallest tree that grows

On land. Mine is the head that crows  
The messengers of heaven. Did you not know?  
Demoke, did you know? Only the tree may eat itself. (p. 43)

This last act in the play by the hero signals the tone of pessimism in the play. Man will never learn from history, and human existence is a repetition of follies and misdeeds. Forest Head articulates this fact when he says to Aroni:

The fooleries of beings whom I have fashioned closer to me weary and distress me. Yet I must persist, knowing that nothing is ever altered ... hoping that when I have tortured awareness from their souls, that perhaps, only perhaps, in new beginnings ... Aroni, does Demoke know the meaning of his act?

ARONI: Demoke, you hold a doomed thing in your hand. It is no light matter to reserve the deed that was begun many lives ago. The Forest will not let you pass. (p. 71)

*A Dance of the Forests* is set in a typical indigenous festival setting. Most of the action takes place in the forest and the only semblance of human setting is in the court of Mata Kharibu, a flashback which reveals a human action of about eight centuries in the past (p. 46). The series of movements in the forest that take us through the action of the play are akin to the various rites performed by the chief priest in a typical festival context on behalf of the community. The various libations performed by Agboreko, 'Elder of sealed lips', and his communications with Murete (tree imp) typify the communion between man and the spirits — a frequent aspect of festival celebrations. Also, the outcome of these rites reveals the capricious nature of the gods. An example will suffice:

AGBOREKO [*sprinkles some of the wine at the foot of the tree and leaves the pot beside it*]: It is I, Agboreko Murete, it is Agboreko that calls you. Ear that never shuts, eye that never closes. Murete, Agboreko brings you the unhappiness of his children. (p. 14)

ESHUORO: Oro alone is the worm that strips himself

...

The slanted eye of night. Beware  
The anger of the silent wind that rustles  
Not a leaf. I'll be revenged. (pp. 43-44)

The second half of part two of the play is dominated by ritual scenes and symbolic acts aimed at expiation of the characters; however, most of the rituals end in futility. The spirits of the Palm, Darkness, Precious stones of the Pachyderms, Rivers and Volcanoes articulate the main sources of man's sustenance and destruction. The symbolism of the half-

child and the dance of the unwilling sacrifice reveal heroic qualities in man which ironically serve no useful purpose at the end of the play. This is made glaringly apparent in an exchange between Demoke and his father:

OLD MAN: Demoke, we made sacrifice and demanded the path of expiation...

DEMOKE: Expiation? We three who lived many lives in this one night, have we not done enough? Have we not felt enough for the memory of our remaining lives?  
(p. 73)

The crucial question one may dare ask is whether one night's traumatic experience for three of a kind is enough to salvage a community yearning for regeneration from its corruption, immorality and the abject lack of a sense of direction.

'Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* unfolds the tragedy of a king (*King Emene*) when he decides to undermine the traditional norms of his community (with justifiable reasons of course). The action of the play hinges on the popular African theme of a conflict in a polygamous home. Jealousy, material want and fear of the future are some of the causes of such conflicts in a polygamous situation. Nneobi, the king's mother, in order to ensure that her son succeeds his father to the throne, commits an atrocious and abominable crime by killing her son's half brother, the legitimate successor to the throne. For a time her crime does not come to light. With the death of the king, Emene ascends his father's throne. Unknown to the king the crime of his mother contaminates the palace and the community. The gods in turn are angry. On the eve of the Peace Week, his first official assignment, his advisers and councillors forbid him to perform the necessary rituals. King Emene, suspecting a plot against him, as the councillors had plotted against his father, purges the Olinzele Council and replaces the Omu (leader of the women's section of the government). This affront to the leadership reverberates throughout the community. When his mother confesses her abominable crime, he kills her and commits suicide.

*King Emene* is 'Zulu Sofola's first popular play — and was preceded by *Wedlock of the Gods* (1972). She is the first Nigerian woman playwright, and as a lecturer in drama, first at the University of Ibadan and now at the University of Ilorin, she has contributed immensely to the development of contemporary Nigerian drama and theatre. As made clear from most of her works, she has a keen interest in traditional drama and theatre. Despite the fact that she is yet to reach the height of her play-

writing career, *King Emene* is a pointer to her deep interest in using traditional forms of drama to advance her ideas about modern society. *King Emene* is simple in plot and language, which sometimes weakens the dramatic qualities of the play; however, her careful unfolding of the events shows a deep understanding and a sound grasp of her culture and the attendant problems of a culture in transition. Also, despite the simple and straightforward language one does not fail to recognise the richness of the speeches by key characters, as in this example where Jigide, leader of the royal lineage, is addressing the king:

You must stand firm and wield your power. You must use an iron hand with these people. Let the old and the young alike know that our new king is not a woman. [*He readjusts his toga.*] It is a truism that the person you pity and help is the same one who slaps your face afterwards. Those people whom we pitied and gave some quarters for shelter and food are now so emboldened as to want to destroy us and usurp our power. Tell them that I said that they should go to hell and never come back. (p. 28)

*King Emene*, like Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*, hinges on a festival motif — the celebration of the Peace Week, an important social and religious event in the life of community. The setting is also a courtyard. The tragic action of the play lies in the king's insistence on celebrating the Peace Week contrary to the message from Mkpitime, goddess of earth. Suspecting a plot against him by members of the Olinzele Council, the highest governing body in the land, he sacks key members of his government and relieves the chief priestess of her duties. His suspicious mind blinds him against the crime his mother has committed on his behalf. Her crime pollutes the palace and contaminates the community. King Emene's inability to distinguish between politics and religion alienates him from his people. Diokpa, the people's representative, detects this fault in the king:

You certainly need somebody's help. The Olinzelle Council has not been of any help to you nor has the Omu proved useful. You have turned a deaf ear to all advice. The people have taken it upon themselves to stem the impending disaster and all we now hear from you is that you are not a king who must be told what to do by his subjects. (p. 19)

In fairness to the king, he pays for his mother's crime, a crime committed by a woman who loves her son and who fears for his future. In this community, the effect of a crime committed by a member of any family reverberates through the whole community. We do not empathise with the tragic fate of Nneobi because her crime is necessitated by selfish

goals — fear of misery and poverty, material bounty for her lineage and the protection of her son — reasons that were not unavoidable. As she reiterates in Act III, Scene I:

Ogugua my son, listen to me. The rat did not fall from the ceiling without a cause. I suffered in my childhood with a poor mother of twelve children. I saw my mother cry bitterly night and day when she had no food for her hungry children. I could not bear this, so I started praying very early for a better life. My prayers were answered. Your father married me. My fortune and that of my children changed. I promised myself then never to return to those miserable days. (p. 44)

Ironically, she not only plunges the rest of her family into further misery but also her action leaves a curse on the whole community. Unlike *A Dance of the Forests*, the events of *King Emene* leave utter gloom in the community and there are indications of further communal chaos in the future except that this is arrested through the necessary rituals provided by the social and religious norms. At least there is a glimmer of hope, but how soon will such a redemption come?

Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* and 'Zulu Sofola's *King Emene* explore and use indigenous motifs; especially, traditional materials have informed both plays. However, their message of cyclic doom and gloom for humanity without an avenue for reparation serves no purpose; these communities need urgent radical political, economic, social and cultural reforms and these goals cannot be achieved by half-hearted heroism and suicide. Contemporary African drama and theatre should be functional especially when they are inspired by the cultural life of the people.

That there are elements of continuity between traditional African dramatic and theatrical traditions and their modern literary counterparts is not disputable. The important query is, how have modern playwrights utilised these influences? To deny the enormous influence of western drama and theatre on modern African drama is to underestimate the effects of the colonial period in Africa. Hence this paper calls for a radical break with the conventionalism of this period. If modern African playwrights and theatre practitioners are to bridge the enormous gulf at present existing between them and their audience, a first step would be to write plays that are relevant to the historical and cultural values of their people. Also, criticism of African drama and theatre needs a new radical perspective. The new criticism which is advocated here must centre on the social, historical, political and aesthetic values that have influenced the lives of the African people.

## NOTES

1. Critical terms used in this paper such as 'colonial', 'evolutionary', 'relativistic' and 'divine' approaches are terms that have been often applied to the criticism of African drama and theatre by scholars and critics.
2. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Literature in Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 500.
3. Ibid., p. 501.
4. Ibid., p. 500. See also E.T. Kirby, 'Indigenous African Theatre', *The Drama Review*, Vol. 18, No 4 (December 1974), p. 32.
5. See, for example, the following:
  - (a) J.A. Adedeji, *The Alarinjo Theatre: The Study of a Yoruba Theatrical Art from its earliest beginnings to the present times*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Ibadan, 1969.
  - (b) M.J.C. Echeruo, 'The Dramatic Limits of Igbo Ritual' in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria* (Nigeria Magazine, 1981), pp. 136-148.
  - (c) John Pepper Clark, 'Aspects of Nigerian Drama' in his *The Example of Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 76-98.
  - (d) Ola Rotimi, 'The Drama in African Ritual Display', in Yemi Ogunbiyi, ed., *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, op. cit., pp. 77-80.
  - (e) Bakary Traore, *The Black African Theatre and its Social Functions* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1972).
  - (f) Oyekan Owemeyala, 'Folklore and Yoruba Theatre', *Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 2, No 2, 1971, pp. 121-124.
6. J.C. de Graft, 'Roots in African Drama and Theatre', in Eldred Jones, ed., *African Literature Today* (New York: African Publishing Company, No 8), p. 7.
7. Atiboroko Uyovbuckerhi, *The Idea of Tragic Form in Nigerian Drama Written in English*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1976, p. 17.
8. Ibid., p. 18.
9. The present writer conducted fieldwork on this festival in 1982.
10. The Ekine drama has influenced playwrights like J.P. Clark and the Yoruba Theatre influenced dramatists like Ogunde, the late Ogunnola and Duro Lapido, etc.
11. The term was probably first applied to the criticism of Nigerian drama by Emmanuel Obiechina in 'Literature — Traditional and Modern - in the Nsukka Environment', in G.E.K. Ofomata, ed., *The Nsukka Environment* (Fourth Dimension publishers, 1978), pp. 28-29. Subsequently many scholars and critics have used the term in their related studies.
12. Culled from Ossie Enekwe, 'Myth, Ritual and Drama in Igboland', in *Drama and Theatre in Nigeria*, op. cit., p. 149.
13. Ibid., p. 152.
14. Oyin Ogunba, 'Traditional African Festival Drama', in Oyin Ogunba and Abiola Irele, eds., *Theatre in Africa* (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1978), p. 5.
15. George Ofono, *The Ine Festival of Ogwashi-Uku*, unpublished B.A. thesis, University of Benin, June 1982.
16. All passages from *A Dance of the Forests* in this paper are quoted from Wole Soyinka, *Collected Plays 1* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 1-77.
17. Passages from 'Zulu Sofola, *King Emene* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974).
18. Eldred Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), p. 33.



# The Image of the Prostitute: A Re-consideration of Okot p'Bitek's Malaya

Malaya is the female character, a prostitute, in Okot p'Bitek's lesser known and admired 'Song of Malaya' (in *Two Songs*).<sup>1</sup> It is a dramatic monologue, written in movements, in the pattern of his earlier songs (*Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol*), and in free verse. The narration is from the point of view of this character who adopts various rhetorical strategies (such as the apostrophe, digressions and repetitions) in the bid to persuade us to adopt her point of view, to inform us, to achieve imaginative consent, and to engage our interests and guide our emotional responses as she addresses us.<sup>2</sup>

The present paper examines the image of the prostitute in 'Song of Malaya'. It is inspired by the different and rather negative responses which Okot p'Bitek's presentation of the prostitute has evoked in the minds of its critics. It attempts to show that Malaya is not only relegated to the background because she is overshadowed by Lawino's magnificence and presentation, but also because there has been the tendency to dismiss her as a mere prostitute. There is the need, therefore, for a more balanced assessment of Malaya in her own terms. Adopting an outright moral attitude is bound to cloud the depth of insights we perceive as we read the poem. If anything, we should adopt two positions in analysing her character. The first is the position that Robert Langbaum takes in his discussion of dramatic monologues: 'Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue for making the «impossible» case and for dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions, because we must suspend moral judgment, we must sympathise in order to read the poem.'<sup>3</sup> He adopted this position because, as he puts it, 'extraordinary moral positions and extraordinary emotions make up the characteristic subject matter of dramatic monologues that follow Browning and Tennyson'. The second position, adopted by Rader, is that in addition to formal considerations

and the type of position adopted by Langbaum, we should not disregard the position of the poet because 'the poet's presence in the poem is a fundamental aspect of its form, not something we know from outside the poem, but something inseparable from our experience of it'.<sup>4</sup> Adopting these positions ensures that we try to be reasonably objective, assume the position of the monologuer and become him/her ('sympathy') while remaining ourselves ('judgment'). It also means that we don't bring in extraneous material (our moral biases and prejudices about WHAT a prostitute is) in judging the character; instead we try to decipher the poet's authorial intention in presenting the character, and the various ramifications of the personality of the character.

Our assertion at the beginning of this paper that Malaya has been overshadowed by Lawino can be supported by the meagre volume of literary attention she has attracted. While criticism and reviews of *Song of Lawino* can be found in journals, books, newspapers and magazines, many admirers of Okot p'Bitek do not know that he wrote another Song in which the monologue is also by a female. Okot has become synonymous with 'the author of *Song of Lawino*'. Even 'Song of Prisoner' has received more sympathetic attention. The few responses to 'Song of Malaya' can be categorised into three types. First, those concerned with only formal characteristics, pointing out that 'Song of Malaya' is a dramatic monologue and so is like *Song of Lawino*.<sup>5</sup> Next, those not only interested in showing formal resemblances with the first Song but in making thematic interpretations. This second group discusses themes with some sympathy towards the prostitute.<sup>6</sup> Whilst Heron sees Malaya as mysterious because we do not know much about her, Moore feels that Okot has created her 'too much on one note'.<sup>7</sup> Tejani sees her as an attempt 'to destroy the reading public's concept of morality'.<sup>8</sup> In making these statements which have the underlying implication of suggesting that, by only showing her as a prostitute, who 'dwells overmuch on the supposed pleasure of the prostitute in her own skill and her own body',<sup>9</sup> Okot p'Bitek failed to give her creation sufficient depth, and they anticipate a third category that dismisses her outright and refuses to discuss her. To the best of my knowledge, this third group's main representative is Roscoe. In his resentment, Roscoe says that

'Song of Malaya' (i.e. Song of the Whore) can be quickly dismissed as a Rabelaisian 'jeu d'esprit', a holiday from commitment and a wasted opportunity, for Okot either refuses to see, or will not examine, the agonies of one of Africa's most distressing human problems. What is offered is a fleshly revel designed to annoy Sunday school teachers.<sup>10</sup>

This third position shares with the second one the tendency to let prejudices arising from stereotyped impressions of, and attitudes towards the prostitute, to prevent detailed attention to the text. These prejudices arising from pre-conceived moral positions (like that of Sunday school teachers?) I believe to be extraneous.

A more balanced reading and analysis of the character of Malaya will show that she reveals patterns of behaviour consonant with society's stereotyped ideas of the prostitute as a sex symbol, but that there are also other sides to her personality. Stereotypical thinking is necessary in the socializing process of finding role models. But when stereotypes become so rigid that individual variations are ignored or denigrated, they act as barriers to recognizing the complexity of human beings. For this reason the word 'stereotype' is commonly used in literary criticism to apply to underdeveloped or 'flat' characters or caricatures recognizable in outline.

Yet even characters presented sketchily are often useful for legitimate literary purpose. A flat character may serve as a contrast or foil to a more rounded one; character types used in comedy and satire often make readers feel superior and in a position to laugh. Furthermore, behind even the most fully developed characters lie the sociological stereotypes.

As mentioned earlier, Malaya exhibits features of behaviour expected of prostitutes by most societies — she is a sex symbol and seductress. But there are also other sides to this complex character. The main characteristics of the sex object as a stereotype is the passivity she is supposed to share with all women, and this sexual apathy has seemed to provide a rationale for prostitution. A stereotypical interpretation can show ample traces of this apathy in Malaya, an apathy which makes her give equal and indiscriminate 'welcome' to all her customers. Her 'trade' and its wares are for everyone — the sailor coming ashore with 'a time bomb pulsating' in his loins (p. 127), the released detainee, with 'granaries/ Full/ To overflowing' (p. 128), the debauching Sikhs at the night clubs with broken heads, and the Indian vegetarian 'breeding like a rat'. The village chief, the politician, the teacher, and the school boy are all included. A consequence of this promiscuity is the spread of venereal disease, the main hazard of the business. The prostitute is therefore a social 'reject' to be ostracised by the members of her society. The other characters, the prostitute's detractors, exhibit this attitude towards her: her brother, the policemen and the judge, the 'married sisters', and members of her society all feel that society's moral protection is on their side.

Another expected feature is her apparent lack of verbal reticence that borders on vulgarity and her cynical attitude towards her clientele, a

cynicism and casualness that is reflected in the way she lists her different 'smiles' for her numerous 'customers'. This could lead to a prudish interpretation of her verbal repertoire.

The same interpretation could be given to her matter-of-fact discussion of the effects of venereal disease, and her admission that she is 'open' for everyone, in spite of the euphemism used to make the admission less offensive ('I am an open pollok blossom/ Bees, butterflies, moths/ Visit me by day and night' — p. 150). It can be seen in the exultatory pattern of her refrain-like exhortations for her kindred, a refrain built on the structure 'Sister Prostitutes/ Wherever you are...', used with different synonyms (Whore, Harlot, Malaya). This is repeated ten times. One way this can be interpreted is that in spite of Malaya's intention to make a case for herself and others like her, her tone undermines her argument. Her intention is to expose societal hypocrisy in sexual matters, especially in relation to prostitutes and the 'using' of them. But this exultant repetition may weaken her case. It would seem to some as if she is merely intent on encouraging other prostitutes to greater heights. To these critics she could be seen as sounding banal, vulgar, even obscene and irresponsible. This may have been responsible for Roscoe's dismissal.

But Malaya's presentation should be taken for what it really is — a deliberate satire. Her words are therefore not to be accepted at the surface level. Okot p'Bitek masters the art of the satirist as an ironist. Malaya is a complex character. One moment she is the hard, money-conscious professional, the next she is a fulfilled and very sentimental mother offering solace to her son whose father has refused to accept him because of society's double standards. Her anger is directed against the perpetrators of this duality. Therefore, her exultation and exhortation of her profession and its practitioners may be designed to offend such moral prudes, whose prudery does not extend to the non-exploitation of prostitutes. Her clientele is multi-racial: Indians, Sikhs, white miners and her regular African 'brothers', and her dragnet covers all the customers she unreservedly welcomes — from politicians, engineers to local chiefs, school teachers and schoolboys. There is thus a universal note to her 'sexploitation', and also to the sexual hypocrisy she decries. So the more sensibilities she hurts, the more satisfaction she derives. Her exultation therefore has a thematic significance within the context of her satire.

Another explanation can be given for her apparent lack of decorum and verbal propriety in speech. In traditional societies, there are taboos that guide linguistic usage. Taboos are not, however, peculiar to traditional societies. The breaking of such taboos results in accusations of linguistic impropriety. But there are occasions when tabooed elements of

language are used, with some kind of 'licence', for specific effects.<sup>11</sup> As a counterpoint to the use of euphemisms and periphrasis, Okot p'Bitek exploits this aspect of traditional orature for some specific stylistic effects — to reveal the character's verbal honesty and lack of squeamishness in 'calling a spade a spade'. This is revealed in the directness with which some usually tabooed elements are described. Thus Malaya's frankness in describing and cataloguing her smiles and her unabashed discussion of her sexual relations with her customers, is a reflection of this traditional usage. This kind of directness in the use of obscene language in literature may not be merely gratuitous, a mere attempt at reproducing street language, rather it may serve a fundamental use in the expression of anger and hate. If taken in the contexts in which they are used, they are often directed towards some person or thing which the narrator loathes. The use of such scatological images may have some kind of didacticism central to it, reminiscent of the use of this kind of 'shock strategy' by Jonathan Swift and, closer to the Okot situation, the description of filth and graffiti in a latrine by Koomson in Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*.<sup>12</sup>

Various other images of the prostitute abound in literature, both African and non-African, and usually these images are unsympathetic. Among them is the exhibition of defiance against constituted authority (moral authority), often reflected in its being directed at the menfolk, a certain cynicism that shows their lack of warmth, their impersonality, their unfeeling and insensitive hardness. But if we suspend moral judgment, these weaknesses can be seen in a new light. Okot p'Bitek's Malaya shares her defiance for men with the much-admired Lawino, the self-righteous village girl. But, as seen by prudes, Malaya's defiance is 'different'. Lawino's tongue is caustic and she is, at times, very insolent. Her anger, her clear lack of reticence at such moments when she loses all self-control and gives in to the jealousy of a rejected wife, has been justified. Ruchoya saw her in this light:

She is so bitter that her justifiable anger and bitterness carries her away to become vulgar and comically offensive... In spite of this, Lawino is that vital voice of Africa, much wanted, a human voice which must of necessity revolt against inhuman treatment and displacement. She stands as a dramatic figure deeply personal and genuinely moving. She is indeed justified to struggle and protest, and her spiritedness in this process is noteworthy. So also is her alienated grief which is deeply experienced all over the world.<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that Ruchoya's attitude is a morally positive and sympathetic one. His acceptance that Lawino is often brusque and rude

seems to imply that this is incidental and of no consequence, it is to be overlooked because it is justified.

The important question, then, is: is there no justification for Malaya's humorous and light-hearted presentation of her plight? Her mockery of her customers lacks Lawino's condescension and conciliatory tone. Malaya does not accept her position as inferior to the men. Instead, in relating to them, she describes them with a certain degree of knowledge that implies complete confidence in herself, and complete knowledge of the fallibility and gullibility of the men. Her attack is against hypocrisy of any type. In her defiance, she emphasizes her role as a free woman, as seductress and sex object. The lack of verbal reticence is in keeping with her role as Malaya, a woman without matrimonial protection — it gives to her speech a degree of appropriateness and authenticity — she lives and talks like a prostitute.

Malaya also resorts to allusion to defend her sexual role:

Raise your glasses and half gourds  
My Sisters,  
And click them with mine....  
Here's to Eve  
With her golden apples,  
And to the Egyptian girl  
Who stole Abraham  
From Sarah's bed....

We'll drink to the  
Daughters of Sodom  
And to the daughters of Gomorrah  
Who set the towns ablaze  
With their flaming kisses....

Let's drink to Rahab  
With her two spy boy friends,  
To Esther the daughter of Abigail,  
To Delilah and her bushy-headed  
Jaw bone gangster,  
To Magdalena who anointed  
The feet of Jesus!

We will remember Theodora  
The Queen of Whores  
Who struck Chief Justinian's marriage  
With her embrace  
And flung his wife  
Beyond the deserts,  
And the unknown Prostitute Sister

Her allusions range from Classical Rome to the Old and New Testaments, and the implication is that if indulgence in sex is a weakness, then it is a weakness she shares with all the outstanding names in her allusions who were human enough to show that weakness in spite of their greatness.

I have already pointed out that Malaya is more than the simple, one-sided, flat stereotype she is taken for. Though it may be conceded that her self-revelation has dramatic irony in that it reveals as undesirable the traits which she is proud of, Malaya is not repulsive. Her frank enjoyment of life, her pleasure in her triumphs, her broad experience, make her attractive as a human being. There are various ways in which this impression is justified from the text. We pointed out that she may be accused of verbal impropriety, of flippancy. But a careful reader realizes a degree of reticence in the speech of this often enigmatic character. There are instances when she tries to be proper, decorous, to state the obvious in circumlocutory patterns, preferring euphemisms and periphrases, her intention being not to cause offence. This carefulness is exhibited in several sections of her Song, in the adoption of a pattern of half-statements, uncompleted words, and even proverbs. She belongs to the society that rejects her, and its social mores, even in speech, guide her. A higher degree of verbal looseness is EXPECTED of a prostitute, therefore her selectiveness and decency become the more surprising.

The fifth section of her Song is significant because it performs the dual function of revealing Malaya as a compassionate woman given to motherly feelings and also to verbal control. Her son has been called a bastard, and she is angry. She jibes at the Christian belief in virgin birth and traces a parallel between her son and Christ:

And you bush teacher  
Troubling my son,  
How dare you  
Throw the first stone  
While Christ writes  
In the sand?.... (p. 173)

This six-line stanza, in question form, and in keeping with her rage, is only one sentence. We expect her to lose control in the next stanza, a follow up on the preceding one. It is true that she questions the morality of the teacher in questioning her son's legitimacy and therefore casting

aspersions on her social situation. He has committed adultery and so is not in a position to judge her. He, too, has illegitimate children and illegal wives:

How many teen-agers  
Have you clubbed  
With your large headed hammer,  
Sowing death in their  
Innocent fields?  
Who does not know  
The little girls  
In your class  
Who are your wives,  
And the children  
That these children  
Have  
By you?.... (p. 173)

The same question pattern is adopted, the images speak for themselves. The male organ is a 'large headed hammer' which performs the physiologically negative function of 'sowing death'. 'Sowing' implies growth, life, regeneration. The teacher prefers to sow destruction, degeneration. Contrasted with Malaya, the mother of three, the giver of life, the attack on the teacher carries a pungent note. The situation, if recreated, as she suckles her baby and coos for it, makes a glaring contrast between her humanity and the teacher's inhumanity. The same pattern is adopted for her brother who 'throws heated stones' (p. 13) into Achola (another prostitute). In criticising human nature, her euphemisms and images often have inanimate attributes, like the 'heated stones' for 'sperms'. She adopts the opposite pattern in addressing inanimate objects: the doctor's injection is described as 'bottled sperm'. She however exploits the ambiguous nature of the phrase. The Chief may be sterile hence the need for the artificial form, she tends to suggest. The doctor's needle reminds her of an arrow:

Doctor,  
I see you stabbing  
The Chief's buttocks  
With the poisoned arrow,  
My sister is wriggling  
As you have orgasm  
And pour bottled sperm  
Into her flesh...  
Tut-tut-tut-tut....



Apart from the highly evocative and suggestive nature of this usage, one can also make another suggestion. This is that Malaya uses obscene or vulgar words in reference to inanimate objects because taboos do not normally apply to them. Addressing them as such would cause them no offence as they have no senses. But because venereal disease is a sensitive experience she adopts a serious tone as she describes it as 'this one pest'. Her images have a pedestrian effect all the same that one wonders if she is a city girl who has not completely lost touch with her village background and its images. For example, aeroplanes are called 'Steel hawks', trains have 'bellies', and shapely thighs remind her of 'elephant tusks' and 'pythons' (p. 154).

Again, Malaya could be dismissed as hard, cold, impassive, unfeeling, etc., the way prostitutes are bound to be treated. Her fifth section, however, paints a different picture. Although she reveals varied emotions, as anger, cynicism, even hatred, in the other sections, her emotions in this section are different. After her initial contempt for every member of her society, male and female, and her 'immoral' exultations of her trade and co-practitioners, she shows some tenderness. To our mind, this is the most dramatic of all the sections in her *Song*. She exposes herself as the compassionate mother when she addresses her suckling baby:

My sweet baby,  
Mm!  
You tickle my teats  
With your toothless kisses  
And remind me  
Of my first love.... (p. 169)

The language is titilating, but the emotion expressed is not only regret but nostalgia. 'My first love' could be one of her earlier children; textually, it refers to her youthful past. She is reminiscing. It refers anaphorically to when she '...was thirteen/ Or maybe fourteen...' Even the short and terse lines make this section stand out from the rest of the text, and even from Lawino's *Song* at its most intense. It marks a further development of the trend in Okot's adoption of more compressed verse started in *Song of Ocol*. There is also more profuse use of punctuations as an element of compression. They are also used to show loss of trend of thought, doubt and regret, and pity. The baby is addressed severally as 'sweet', 'darling'; she 'loves' it; its tears stab '...your/ Mum's heart' (p. 170). She moves from the nursing baby to her school-age son. He is sobbing, is hungry and has been mocked at school. She asks him to sit on

her lap and calls him 'My Boy' (p. 172). Before this, the single-line, single-word, stanza 'What?' (p. 171), signals a change in her mood from pure tenderness towards her brood to one mixed with bitterness and hostility as she attacks the offending teacher.

In the early stanzas of this section, Okot masterfully uses punctuation and typographical arrangement to foreground the relationship between Malaya's psychological state of mind and the pattern of her utterances as she at one moment expresses love, at another doubt, the next anger, and then outright venom (cf. pp. 169-172). They help to foreground emotions in a remarkable way. Punctuation marks used here perform most of the function they serve in the English language. But outstanding is the use of question marks to mark inquiry and to express doubt; dots show discontinuous discourse which acts as indices of either loss of trend of thought or emotional breakdown, leading to tears; exclamation marks have a variety of functions, revealing different moods, particularly excitement, happiness, surprise or indignation. At expression level, uncompleted words may show interruption or even loss of self-control, etc. (e.g. 'A bastard.../ Illegit...?', p. 171); chuckle words, usually accompanied by exclamations, may also show lack of belief or indifference or doubt; and interjections ('Oh!' and 'Mm!') have their own augmentative effects. The total effect is that punctuations recreate the supposed dialogue between mother and her children, all emanating from Malaya as she responds to different facets of that dialogue. This is dramatic monologue at its best. Here, Malaya is shown as capable of tenderness and display, even if it is momentary and reserved for family. It will not be completely correct, then, to dismiss her as abrupt, insensitive, passive and impersonal. In all, however, it shows her attempt, as a monologuer, to carry along the audience and to win their sympathy, as she successfully does, to herself. She wants us to see that the prostitute is a mother and a benefactor capable of intense feelings, in spite of society's feelings towards her.

The quasi-physical and impressionistic interpretations are not far-fetched as Malaya really seems to attract our sympathy. She makes one feel that the society that exploits prostitutes physically, while reserving moral advantage over them with which to punish and blackmail them, is at fault. There is reason therefore to believe that, in portraying Malaya as he did, Okot p'Bitek expects her to win our sympathy. He is one writer who is not callous about the plight of the prostitute. Malaya's creation reminds one of several prostitutes in African literature: Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Wanja in *Petals of Blood* who is a victim of ruthless capitalist exploitation; Ekwensi's Jagua in *Jagua Nana* who tries to change and

become a more acceptable and humanitarian member of her society; Oculi's prostitute, Rosa, in *Prostitute*; etc. These prostitutes differ in the depth of their development as characters, but retain a similarity in their unique profession, and the sympathetic treatments given them by their 'creators'. Going farther afield, Malaya can be compared with Blake's picture of London where he shows the prostitute as an extreme example of man's inhumanity — they are to be pitied as victims of society:

But most thro' midnight streets I hear  
How the youthful harlot's curse  
Blasts the new-born infant's tear,  
And blights with plagues the marriage hearse.<sup>15</sup>

Blake points to prostitution as the support, even the price of marriage. Blake in his time was interested in portraying the whore as undesirable but as a victim of society's 'mind-forged manacles'. Men are now imprisoned in the chains they have forged for themselves; it was they who invented the society which now oppresses them. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has escaped the curse man has brought upon himself. Prostitution is one of such curses, the consequence of society's restriction of free love.

Okot p'Bitek's Malaya, as a twentieth-century East African, is an example of the same universal plight Blake describes in 'London'. Her portrayal may reveal Okot's feelings about the condition of prostitution. Prostitutes accept the contempt of policemen and judges and churchmen. Married men also 'use' her. Wives nag husbands at home, thus make them turn to prostitutes as substitutes; thus Malaya is surprised that her married sisters are unhappy that she provides warm hospitality to their husbands. In her own case, Malaya has three sons for a man whose intolerable and ugly wife has borne two daughters:

You have two little daughters,  
I have three sons....  
Our husband is father  
To, at least, five kids....

In Malaya's African society, sons are preferred to daughters — so Malaya is even more fulfilling, to the unnamed man, as procreator (hence she sees herself as an 'outside' wife). As receptive as she is, she is nevertheless aware and worried about the hazards of her trade, such as venereal disease, though she treats them with some humour. But most significant is the image of Malaya as a 'liberated' woman who is aware of

the choices open to her. This awareness frees her from the compulsiveness of traditional role-playing (the type Lawino suggests for herself) and, at the same time, awakens her to the complexity of living and loving. To be fully human is to face the hardness of life with strength. Her apparent lack of seriousness, which Roscoe dismisses for a 'revel', is the show of her emotional strength, the strength to cope with the vagaries of the realities of her existence while remaining level-headed and humorous. She is, therefore, not a simple, one-sided, flat, monotonous character but a complex one portrayed in a simple manner. It is this simplicity in her portrayal that has misled most critics.

One last statement on authorial intention and the place of Okot p'Bitek in the *Song* as a satirist, wielding the tool of irony effectively. There seems to be a tendency among critics to take *Two Songs* literally and thus to misinterpret the personae of Prisoner and Malaya. Marshment has aptly decried this trend in her assessment of reviews of 'Song of Prisoner', particularly that by Atieno-Odhiambo:

Atieno makes the mistake of too readily assuming that what the Prisoner says is what the poem 'says'. He makes no mention of *one of Okot's most recognised qualities as a poet — his irony*. Actually, he is not alone in this: many reviewers of Okot's poetry, however much they may praise his irony, seem to forget all about it when it comes to reading the poems and analysing what they are saying ... opinions expressed by the characters in the poems should never be extracted and presented as the views of Okot — at least not without careful consideration of the context of the 'Singer' and his or her situation. (my italics)<sup>16</sup>

This observation is crucially true of 'Song of Malaya'. Earlier on, we pointed out that Malaya (as a character) is satirised, as those things she shows as desirable, praises and exhorts, are revealed as undesirable, from the responses of members of her society, the auditors of her society's norms. But the satire is double-edged. These 'protectors' are also guilty, as it were. They have denuded their own integrity (and thus moral objectivity, if there is any such thing!) and are so not in the best position to judge her. In a sense, too, Malaya acts as a juror in the trial of her 'judges'! She has been shown to respect some of the norms of her society — in her attempt at some verbal control, in spite of the judgment of prudes. But at the same time, she maintains a contradictory stance in order to make her 'case'. She has to defy all that her society adores, all that is responsible, in a sense, for her society's hypocrisy, its ills, its alienation of the prostitute as a vagrant. She has to turn into a rebel. She portrays all the members of her society as deluded: their perceptions of the role of the prostitute in their society is muddled. They denigrate her,

yet use her to achieve their various ends. They are not realistic; if they were, they would have realised the inevitable, and natural, existence of sexual urge, of libido, come to terms with it and accept the paradoxical position of the malaya. Her rhetorical question at the end of the last section, with its use of the cyclical image of darkness and light, of the inevitability of the rising of the sun and the coming of night, clinch her argument:

But  
Who can command  
The sun  
Not to rise in the morning?  
Or having risen  
Can hold it  
At noon  
And stop it  
From going down  
In the west? (p. 184)

If this is impossible, then bravo, malayas! Hence she ends the section with a last note of exhortation of prostitutes and all their supposed ills to their society. This last section is a kind of summary of her protest, a protest against sexual repression, and repression of all kinds, and to achieve that freedom, she has to defy every institution and authority in her society. Thus, in this section, she adopts a tone of ironic acceptance of what every member of society does to oppress her, her tone is one of surprise and disappointment. The repeated use of the pattern, 'Let + noun group...' (repeated fourteen times), creates the misleading impression of unquerrying acceptance of her fate by Malaya, that she suffers from despondency and self-pity. That will be being too literal. But this impression is punctured by the questions she asks above. That is where the irony lies. The irony is the source of her freedom, she seems to imply: she is denying rather than accepting society's judgment. She has to achieve this in a unique way. On a final note, Heywood has summarised Malaya's method, as rebel:

In order to reach this point of positive commitment Malaya had to become nothing and rid herself of all collective restraint and dependencies. The lines preceding her affirmation read like a ritual stripping or like a formal exorcism. She casts off in succession all familial, social, and societal bonds, defying in turn men and their wives; parents and brothers; church and state; God himself (if he is on their side); and every power of civic law and persecution.<sup>17</sup>

This kind of interpretation of the significance of the character of the prostitute cannot be rendered unless we take a more positive note towards the poet's use of irony. A too literal interpretation of the character, a tendency to identify Malaya's with Okot's moral position or lack of seriousness and sensitivity, will be grossly misleading. He has instead exploited, effectively, a weakness in the first-person dramatic monologue — the monologuer's presentation of his case solely from his point of view, a point of view which need not necessarily be that of his creator.

#### NOTES

1. Okot p'Bitek, *Two Songs* ('Song of Prisoner', 'Song of Malaya') (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1971). All further references will be to this edition and are included in the text.
2. Rhetorics is defined here as the art of 'persuasion' and 'self-justification' in speech — after Aristotle and Quintilian. It derives from the fact that Okot p'Bitek emphasizes the importance of the 'spoken word' as the vehicle of the communication between the 'singer' and his 'audience'. See Okot p'Bitek, 'What is Literature', *Busara*, 4, 1, 1972, pp. 21-27.
3. Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (New York: Norton & Co., Inc., 1957), p. 93.
4. Ralph W. Rader, 'The Dramatic Monologue and Related Lyric Forms', *Critical Inquiry*, 30, 1, 1976, pp. 131-151.
5. See Taban lo Liyong, 'Two Songs by Okot p'Bitek: Song of Prisoner, Song of Malaya', *Dhana*, 1971, pp. 59-61; Timothy Wangusa, 'East African Poetry', *African Literature Today*, 6 1973, pp. 46-53; and O.R. Dathorne, *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Heinemann, 1976).
6. See Bahadur Tejani, 'Review of Okot p'Bitek's *Two Songs*: «Song of Prisoner» and «Song of Malaya»', *African Literature Today*, 6, 1973, pp. 160-166; G.A. Heron, *The Poetry of Okot p'Bitek* (London: Heinemann, 1976); and Gerald H. Moore, 'Okot p'Bitek: The Horn of the Grasslands', paper presented to the Fourth Ibadan Annual Literature Conference, University of Ibadan, July 1979.
7. Moore, p. 19.
8. Tejani, p. 163.
9. Moore, p. 18.
10. Adrian Roscoe, *Uhuru's Fire: African Literature East to South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 54.
11. Peter Trudgill has observed, in talking about taboo words in human language, that 'if they were not said at all they could hardly remain in the language'. See his *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 29.
12. Reference to the African Writers Series edition (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1968), pp. 105-106. The use of shock strategy is not peculiar to African literature. For fairly detailed discussions of its use in other areas, see Stanford Luce, 'Increment and Excrement: Celine and the Language of Hate', *Maledicta*, 1, 1, 1977, pp. 43-48; and

- Terence Collins, 'Self-Image Through Imagery: Black Art Poets and the Politics of Excrement', *Maledicta*, 3, 1, 1979, pp. 71-84.
13. M.N. Ruchoya, 'Lawino's Complex Protest: A Socialist Re-appraisal', *Busara*, 3, 2, 1971, p. 57.
  14. Okot p'Bitek, *Two Songs*, pp. 166-167.
  15. Andrew M. Wilkinson, *William Blake: Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (London: University Tutorial Press, 1958), p. 36.
  16. Margaret Marshment, 'Song of Prisoner: A Reply to Atieno-Odhiambo', *Busara*, 4, 1, 1972, p. 63.
  17. Annemarie Heywood, 'Modes of Freedom: Songs of Okot p'Bitek', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, XV, 1, 1980, p. 71.

# Ama Ata Aidoo

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## FOR BESSIE HEAD

To begin with,  
there's a small problem of address:

calling you  
by the only name some of us  
knew you by,

hailing you by titles you  
could not possibly  
have cared for,

referring you to  
strange and clouded  
origins that eat into  
our past our pain  
like prize-winning cassava tubers in  
abandoned harvest fields...

Some of us never ever met you.

And who would believe  
that but those who know  
the tragedies of our land  
where  
non-meetings,  
visions unopening and  
other such  
abortions  
are every day reality?

If not all of it,  
then some?...

To continue a  
confession of sorts,

'Miss Head' will just not do.  
'Bessie' too familiar.

Bessie Head,

your face swims into focus  
through soft clouds of  
cigarette smoke and from behind the  
much much harder barriers erected by some  
quite unbelievable  
20th century philosophy,

saying more of  
your strength  
than all the tales  
would have us think.

For the moment,

we fear and  
dare not accept that  
given how things  
now  
are,



poetry almost  
becomes dirges and  
not much more.

But  
we hold on to knowing  
ourselves as daughters of  
darklight women  
who are so used to Life  
— giving it  
feeding it —

Death  
was always  
quite unwelcome:  
— taking them by surprise —  
an evil peevish brat  
to be flattered,  
cleaned  
oiled  
pomaded  
over-dressed and perfumed...

We fear to remember:

fatigued as we are by so much  
death and dying and  
the need to bury and  
to mourn.

Bessie Head  
such a fresh ancestress!

if you chance  
on a rainy night  
to visit,

if you chance  
on a sunny day  
to pass by,

look in to see  
— how well we do  
— how hard we fight  
— how loud we scream

against the plots  
— to kill our souls our bodies too  
— to take our land, and  
— feed us shit.

Come,  
benevolently,  
Dear Fresh Spirit,

that rejoining  
The Others,  
you can tell them that  
now more than ever,

do we need  
the support  
the energy

to create  
recreate and  
celebrate...

nothing more  
absolutely  
nothing less.

# Chris Zithulele Mann

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## IN MEMORIAM: ALFRED BLOSE

Blose, remember him? Wore boots  
chewed a matchstick, boss of the team  
that worked on springs, dug out the muck,  
packed in clean sand, and built squat tanks  
to store the flow. We buried him  
at noon today, near granite cliffs  
with shacks on top, with rows and rows  
of sandheaps below — like molehills  
with crosses stuck, skewly, in them.  
Beneath a thorn, the priest took word,  
men one side, women the other,  
the box between, plain, painted white,  
dappled with small, melting shadows.  
Blose got killed, taking the sun,  
taking a beer, same hot blue skies,  
at a shebeen, the week before.  
Prayers. Speeches. A fierce sermon.  
Then envelopes, with cash from friends,  
and messages. 'Swallow the stone,  
Blose family!' 'Sleep on the wound!'  
The plastic wreath was taken off,  
the lid unscrewed: Time for farewells.  
We filed past, the women singing.  
Nothing tranquil, no mind at ease  
inside that small hot ship of wood.  
His brow was bandaged tight, but not  
the puncture mark between the eyes.  
The mouth half-gaped, still crying out.  
A black-shawled woman moaned, shuddered.  
His widow slumped. The box was closed,  
the weight heaved up, and slow, stumbling,

sand in our shoes, we reached the grave  
and put him down. The sermon's theme:  
Be strong; God's will remains a cloud.  
Black crows, floating up the cliff-face,  
like the hymn-books, looked small and far.  
His suit went in, his smartest shirt,  
sleeping mat, and blanket, to help  
when he sat up, to leave that hole.  
In spurts, the singing swelled, faded.  
We spaded in the grey-white soil.  
Never knew much, outside his work  
about the man. Knew that his Dad,  
a chief-maker, stopped a bullet  
two years before, that his Mother  
worked on the Reef, couldn't be found.  
Knew that a schoolboy, stoned red-eyed,  
an orphan, sheltered by Blose,  
beaten by him, a month before,  
applied the knife. The rest's private,  
not my business, except for springs,  
the fact of springs, in that crowded  
rural slumscape, trickling water  
into tanks, greywhite concrete tanks  
with bright taps, Blose's monuments.

## DUMA WILBERFORCE GWALI

Duma, like Sisyphus  
grimly shoved  
the burdens of his adolescence  
towards the summit of the mountain called Matric.

And year after year  
that boulder,  
be it no funds for books,  
a pregnancy for which he had to buy a beast,  
or weeks of blood and teargas in the township streets,

crushed slowly back,  
then rumbled hugely down the slope again.

‘BLACK THEOLOGY!’ ‘BLACK POWER!’:  
the battle-cries  
of Nxele’s warriors  
shared the same cosmology and rage  
as Duma and his friends,  
massing where the Xhosa army massed  
to storm the settler village six generations before.

And Duma’s Grahamstown  
smouldered in its hollow,  
divided, interdependent, despairing of peace.

Headboy of a row of smashed windows  
and scribbled walls  
nicknamed a school,  
and robed in a blazer  
with bright brass buttons,  
he performed a poem in praise of Education  
on Speech Day,  
in the fierce, declamatory Xhosa style.

Like the master bard Mqhayi’s,  
his metaphors bucked  
in the zebra-mix of north and south.

That Christmas,  
inside a thatchgrass circumcision lodge,  
decorated with tackie white  
from head to foot,  
he pondered tradition with his peers.

Even so far from town,  
even his shades among,  
the PHISH! PHISH! of airbrakes  
would mingle with the coughing bark of buck at night,  
the chugchugging DRRRR!  
of distant trucks  
gearing up to chomp some mountain in their path.

The roofing of the lodge  
was waterproofed with plastic shopping bags.

His face anointed  
with ochre clay  
to mark his passage into manhood,  
Duma came back to Rhini:  
no work, even for those  
who'd passed a harsh Matric with dignity.

Last news I had  
he'd moved to some big city near the Reef:  
vizored, helmetted,  
questing for cash,  
he welded trucks,  
wielding a bright-blue, oxy-acetylene lance.

EVA HUNTER

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## Tracking Through the Tangles: The Reader's Task in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

Over the past fifteen years there has been a burgeoning of literary criticism on the writing of Doris Lessing, above all in the United States. But there has not as yet been any research into her work that entails the use of methods developed from reader response theory or reception aesthetics. Nor, with the exception of a single article by Jenny de Reuck on the Alita short stories by Sarah Gertrude Millin, has any criticism of Southern African writing been published that employs techniques that are influenced by this important branch of modern theory.<sup>1</sup> And yet, over

the past ten years, literary journals on both sides of the North Atlantic have featured regularly, sometimes in entire special issues, articles dealing with the process of reading, the nature and limits of interpretation, the confrontation, transaction, or interrogation between texts and readers. Furthermore, even though the content of each of the Lessing titles produced over the past three and a half decades has attracted much debate, Lessing's style has been relatively neglected. Indeed, it may be said that she has been regarded by many as a writer worthy of academic study despite her style, which is usually treated as a medium inferior to the message it carries. A noteworthy exception is the excellent full-length study of the form of the writer's work, Betsy Draine's *Substance under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing*.<sup>2</sup>

The model adopted in this article on *The Grass is Singing* — a model that was given its most sophisticated formulation by Roman Jakobson — views the literary text as a form of communication.<sup>3</sup> The author and the reader of a text are related to each other as the sender and the receiver of a message. The transmission and reception of any message depend on the presence of one or more shared codes of communication between sender and receiver. Reading consists, therefore, of a process of decoding what has by various means been encoded in the text. Such criticism is therefore both rhetorical and audience-orientated. A key notion will be that of the Implied Reader. This notion was first consistently adopted by Wayne C. Booth.<sup>4</sup> The implied reader is regarded as only one of the meaning-producing elements in the text, a shadowy presence differing from an actual reader in that it is created by the work, and functions, in a sense, as the ideal interpreter. The constitution of the characteristics of the implied reader is regarded as an interpretative strategy, such characteristics being constructed from markers within the text and then used to validate a reading. The term 'implied reader', is, then, a relative one, guaranteeing the consistency of a reading without claiming its absolute validity, in accordance with the awareness that no text or critic is objective, that meaning is a consequence of being in a particular situation in the world, and that even if within that situation one is part of a community, one is part of an 'interpretive' community (the term is Stanley Fish's).

The method adopted is to identify and describe the textual markers (or codes) that constitute the characteristics of the implied reader. Among such markers are: explanations and definitions formulated by the narrator, cultural and literary allusions, and the use of deictics ('here', 'now', etc.) which indicate, for instance, the distance the text posits between reader and narrator and reader and text. Such scrutiny of the discourse situation leads to consideration of 'traditional' features of criti-

cism, such as irony. Thus, the systematic analytical study of the work — a study which is intended to reveal the codes by which the author inscribes her audience within the work — will be accompanied by an interpretative level of enquiry. This level of enquiry will lead to consideration of the following question: what are the codes or conventions, aesthetic and cultural, to which the author refers in facilitating or complicating, or perhaps even frustrating, the reader's sense-making operations?

Explanations and definitions formulated by the narrator constitute a marked feature of Lessing's work. The third person narrator of the *Children of Violence* series, says Nicole Ward Jouve, has a 'totalizing' voice and a 'totalizing' intention.<sup>6</sup>

In an article entitled 'Of Mud and Other Matter — *The Children of Violence*', in which Jouve both declares her admiration of Lessing and criticises some of the writer's basic tenets and techniques, she states that Lessing's 'changes of heart' in the series contradict the claim that the narrative voice makes, 'from the start', to be 'inclusive'. There is 'a totalizing intention written into every line of the prose' (p. 96). 'You are never given to understand that there is going to be more, or there has been more [than] the text is going to tell you'; instead, 'as you read [passages from the novels] you know that the authorial consciousness, either through, or in default of, its characters, claims to be complete' (p. 97). And this is why the text 'cannot afford contradictions.... That is perhaps why all of Martha's dreams are so clear, readily and totally interpretable. Darkness, unintentionality, are not allowed in.' And yet 'they are there. The gaps, the contradictions, are everywhere' (p. 97). Jouve's criticism, argued with meticulousness and zest, convinces, and the implications for analysing Lessing's attitude to her implied reader are obvious.<sup>7</sup> What does such a very confident tone (or, evidence of a desire to exercise such inordinate control?) signal? Anxiety? Due to lack of confidence in her ability as writer? In the reader? Over-confidence in her ability to instruct the reader? More important than such speculation is the fact that overt strategies of control may disguise covert methods of complicating, even frustrating, the reader's sense-making operations.

In *The Grass is Singing*, too, the narrator's voice signals completeness of knowledge, and the text encodes, consistently, explicit markers as to the attitude the implied reader should adopt. Judgement is elicited from the reader on, most importantly, the central character Mary Turner, and also on the white settlers, while the reader's assessment of the murderer, Moses, and response to the presence of the African landscape in the novel also contribute to the reader's final attitude to Mary.



The reader is invited to judge Mary both as a representative of the white settler community, and as their victim. To the extent that the narrator's sympathy with Mary is shared, the reader will judge the settlers to be more culpable in their treatment of Mary while she is alive and in their reaction to her murder; to the extent that the reader, along with the narrator, rejects Mary, we condemn the settlers along with her. Condemnation of the settlers is inescapable; towards Mary there is a covert ambivalence in the narrator's attitude that makes the reader's final judgement of the central character problematic.

Before encountering the narrator's explanations and definitions, the reader is alerted by title and epigraphs to expect cultural and emotional poverty within the pages of this novel. The title phrase 'the grass is singing' is repeated in the first epigraph, an extract of fifteen lines, where it is situated in its original context, *The Waste Land*. The reader is supposedly one literate enough to understand the implications of this extract from T.S. Eliot's poem (and to agree with the narrator that Tagore is second-rate, escapist stuff — see p. 141). In the second epigraph an Author Unknown instructs the reader to understand that it is 'by the failures and misfits of a civilization that one can best judge its weaknesses'.

Lessing's guidance is less disguised when she assumes her own narrative voice. At the start of Chapter One, in the paragraph immediately following the 'newspaper extract' that begins the tale, the reader is told: 'When natives steal, murder or rape, that is the feeling white people have.' And this feeling is 'a little spurt of anger mingled with what was almost satisfaction, as if some belief had been confirmed, as if something had happened which could only have been expected' (p. 9).

On page 13 the narrator makes a pronouncement on the paternalistic ramblings of a District Native Commissioner on native law ('Remarks like these ... have become since'). On page 27 the reader is told that '«white civilization» ... will never, never admit that a white person, and most particularly, a white woman, can have a human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person'.

And this is the narrator on the Turners' lack of awareness that they provide 'the staple of gossip' among local farmers: 'People who live to themselves, whether from necessity or choice, and who do not trouble themselves about their neighbours' affairs are always disquieted and uneasy if by some chance they come to know that other people discuss them' (p. 179). White people have (always) 'this feeling' of anger and satisfaction when 'natives' commit crime. People 'who live to them-

selves' are 'always' disturbed by evidence of the attention of their neighbours.

Lessing's implied reader is in need of information, is obviously an outsider to the colony, does not know its ways, but is interested in discovering the connections between the brutality and ignorance of white settlers (the collective) and the decline into madness of one of their number (the individual). The reader is also, unlike Mary and most South Africans of that time, according to the narrator, informed on the terms 'class' and 'race': 'These things [Mary's privileged economic status] did not enter her head. «Class» is not a South African word; and its equivalent, «race», meant to her the office boy in the firm where she worked, other women's servants, and the amorphous mass of natives in the streets, whom she hardly noticed' (pp. 36-37). The reader is also, of course, the reader of 1948-49 (Lessing brought her manuscript and infant son to England in 1949). At that time the battle to free the African colonies of the British 'yoke' (as it is usually termed) was still to gather its full impetus: a deal of boldness, determination, *courage* was needed in order to condemn so firmly, and so sweepingly.

Perhaps this is a reason for Lessing shortening the distance between narrator and reader (and lengthening that between reader and the action in the text — the 'newspaper cutting' that places the action in a reported past is one device for achieving this effect). Acceptance of the claims of a voice that condemns so confidently and tartly, might lead to the desire to enter into complicity with it, to share its coolly bitter, laconic, and intimate stance of defiance of the Establishment (a stance that sustains the entire thesis of the novel that British 'civilization' imposed on Africa is so wicked as to have both a representative and a victim in mad Mary). A negative response to the narrator's confident, tart voice might result in irritation and a desire to reject its claims.

Distance between narrator and reader is shortened by certain observations on characters that the narrator confides in the reader, the use of colloquialisms, the sparse use of irony, and by the choice of a vocabulary, syntax and sentence structure that generally promote the suggestion of frankness, straightforwardness, the sharing of comfortable agreement between teller of the tale and listener.

There are observations on the human fallibility of the settlers: they are too afraid to discuss the murder, yet secrete the newspaper clippings 'among old letters, or between the pages of a book'; they glance at the 'yellowing' pieces of paper from time to time with 'closed, secretive faces' (p. 9). The reader possibly shares with the narrator a knowingness about

the settlers' motives, their state of fear, and a feeling of indulgence toward their human weakness.

Colloquial phrases reduce the distance between narrator and reader and so encourage identification with the narrator's point of view. On page 10, these are 'and that was the end of it', 'an hour or so's companionship', and 'positively grateful', and, on page 13, 'Well...'. There are also colloquial phrases that explicitly guide the reader in 'rating' responses: 'that was the most extraordinary thing about it' (p. 9), 'the most interesting thing about the whole affair' (p. 10), and 'The more one thinks about it, the more extraordinary the case becomes' (p. 11).

The implied reader is possibly appreciative of other devices that convey frankness, assertive vigour, and a flair for the dramatic; these are: the brevity (less than ten words) of some sentences, the structural uncomplicatedness of even long sentences, the simple, everyday vocabulary, the clear markers of stages in the action of the narrator's commentary, and a sparse use of irony. The short sentences seem to crystallise the thoughts or emotions of preceding or following sentences (Morphet, p. 15).<sup>8</sup> 'The newspaper did not say much', 'And then they turned the page to something else' and 'The murder was simply not discussed' all appear on page 9, on which there are only 10½ sentences apart from the newspaper extract. On page 10 there's the racy description of Slatter: 'He was still a proper cockney, even after twenty years in Africa. He came with one idea: to make money. He made it. He made plenty. He was a crude, brutal, ruthless, yet kindhearted man, in his own way, and according to his own impulses, who could not help making money' (p. 14).

Even long sentences are relatively undemanding in analytical terms when they function on the principles of repetition and accretion and employ co-ordinating conjunctions ('and', 'but', 'or'). On page 9, the two sentences that have more than thirty-five words ('People all over ... have been expected'; 'Many must have ... secretive faces') have just these features.

Easy acceptance of the reader's narrative guide is also invited by the simple vocabulary and clear markers on the progress both of the action and the narrator's commentary upon the action. In the first nine paragraphs of the novel there are eleven such 'markers'. Those designated with an asterisk also begin a paragraph and so articulate connections between structural elements of the text larger than sentences:

When  
And then\*

But\*  
For  
Yet  
Yet  
And then\*  
But  
Though\*  
Thus\*  
But

Irony invites the reader to inhabit with the ironist a position that is morally or intellectually superior to whoever or whatever is the butt of the irony. On page 9 there is a one-line paragraph, 'And then they turned the page to something else', which is preceded by the information that when the 'people all over the country' (as opposed to 'the people in «the district» who knew the Turners') glanced at the report of Mary's death they felt anger and satisfaction. Lessing's reader might deduce, from the isolation of the sentence as well as its brevity, the limited imaginative and analytical powers of such cursory colonial readers of newspapers.

Who might the implied reader be? (S)he is probably English, and so the more sensitive to the attacks on institutions British (and Lessing did take her manuscript to England). The implied reader is perhaps a newcomer to The Group, is perhaps someone like one of those RAF officers who joined the small band of Southern Rhodesian communists the intricacies of whose debates and love lives are chronicled by Lessing in the *Children of Violence* series?

The reader has, in fact, a (failed) surrogate within the text, Tony Marston, the young Englishman. As an outsider who becomes for a short time involved in the action, he functions as a touchstone of the duties of the sensitive observer: 'Tony [Marston] was the person present who had the greatest responsibility that day' (p. 27); '...the important thing, the thing that really mattered, so it seemed to [Marston], was to understand the background, the circumstances, the characters of Dick and Mary, the pattern of their lives' (p. 23).

This is precisely what the following chapters encourage the reader to do. The implied reader of *The Grass is Singing* will not fail, as does Marston, to 'understand'.

The distance between reader and action is at first somewhat extended. Twice the deictic 'then' (as opposed to 'now') is used in the first nine paragraphs. The start of the narrative, pages 9-14 of Chapter 1, is placed in some uncertain time after the day of the murder (enough time has elapsed for newspaper cuttings to turn yellow, p. 9), while chapters 2 to

11, which tell of Mary's life up to and including the day she dies, are an extended flashback. After page 14, Chapter 1, for the most part (pp. 15-26, 28-31), recounts events the morning after Mary's murder and features use of the historic present and some dialogue, which would tend to close the distance between reader and action; however, the frequent interjections (explanations usually of emotions, thoughts, and motives) of the narrator 'alienate' the reader from character and action, insist on critical judgement.

Dialogue creates an external impression of the lifelikeness of characters: there is very little dialogue in this novel. The lifelikeness of Mary Turner, as of other Lessing characters, grows predominantly from the rendering of their psyche. From Chapter 2 onward the text invites the immersion of the reader in the consciousness of Mary Turner, an immersion that would be likely to lead the reader past fear and vague pity to the enlightened sort of 'understanding' Lessing is soliciting for the mad woman at the heart of *The Grass is Singing*.

By the end of Chapter 1 the reader has been primed to assess Mary's decline within the framework of the settlers' weaknesses and prejudices. The narrator has exposed their vices, they exhibit these themselves (Charlie Slatter and Sergeant Denham feel for Mary not pity but a 'bitter contemptuous anger', p. 20), and Marston's shock at the behaviour of Slatter and the policeman act as further commentary. As the reader approaches Mary, she has already been depicted as seen through the eyes of two settlers and by an outsider watching the settlers watching her. Loathing and fear are what the two settlers feel toward her, while there is pity and 'a little disgust' from the fresh-faced Englishman (p. 20).

The reader is therefore being prepared on a rational level to regard Mary with sympathy. Yet, perhaps the reader is also being readied for revulsion against Mary and what she is? The first description of the central character is presented, it seems, through the narrator's point of view (as well as the narrator's voice), rather than Slatter's: 'He turned and went into the bedroom. Mary Turner was a stiff shape under a soiled white sheet. At one end of the sheet protruded a mass of pale strawish hair, and at the other a crinkled yellow foot. Now a curious thing happened. The hate and contempt that...' (p. 17). The narrator (not only Slatter and Denham) depersonalises Mary. And aren't the gruesome touches (inserted for the sake of 'realism'?) of the dogs licking Mary's blood and the stiffened arm of her corpse knocking 'horribly' against the narrow door of the police car more likely to stimulate in the reader disgusted recoil than pity (pp. 17, 25)?

In Chapter 2 the reader learns of Mary's early life up until the time she marries Dick Turner. The geographical, social, economic, and emotional features of her setting are supplied with economy — and emphasis, so that certain features have both an objective 'reality' and an added layer of meaning, for Mary, and also for the reader. These are the store, dust, and the box on stilts. When Mary finds these elements of her unhappy childhood returning to plague her adult life, they will stimulate in her a sense of being trapped in repetitive patterns set by her childhood. This is Mary's reality, delineated by the narrator as such. Is the reader, too, however, encouraged to attribute particular ('symbolic') significance to these features? It would seem so: and if this is so, then the reader is likely to share Mary's sense that her fate is predetermined. 'Dust and chickens; dust and children and wandering natives; dust and the store — always the store' (p. 35). The reader will probably become keyed to a symbolic level of meaning signalled by repetition and by recall of the epigraphs. 'Dust', dryness, aridity; Eliot. Mary's inheritance of bleakness, aridity, and poverty, material, emotional, intellectual, cultural.

The third prominent feature of Mary's childhood, the box on stilts, is mentioned three times in five pages (36, 37, 40). Epithets for the house like 'fly-away little' (p. 36) and 'sordid little' (p. 37) appear to convey the narrator's point of view as well as Mary's; the reader becomes attuned to the metaphoric level of signification, to the existence of an emotional and psychic state involving containment, entrapment and a precarious, insecure sense of place in the world.

The Freudian emphasis on the definitive influence upon the adult of crucial childhood experiences is even more overt in the dreams recounted on pp. 172-75: the mark laid by Mary's father upon the child's sexuality is overlaid by the dominating phallic presences of those men who enter Mary's adult sexual life, Dick, and the fearsome ('black') black man, Moses. The reader is encouraged to regard Mary's career as ineluctable. This is despite the narrator's assertions that Mary could, at certain points, have chosen to change her life. 'If she had wanted, she could have taken a flat and.... There was nothing to prevent her living by herself.... She could have become a person on her own account' (pp. 37-38).

Sympathy is likely to be the reader's response to the details of the early life of this child, whose mother's reaction to the father's alcoholism is to become a self-pitying nag and teach her daughter emotional and physical 'frigidity' (pp. 34, 36). The reader must surely feel sadness for a child whose happiest time occurs when her parents grieve for her dead brother and sister, because it is then that they stop quarrelling (p. 35).

But the narrator's repeated statement that Mary has times when she is 'very happy' (pp. 35 (twice), 37, 38), when offset against the 'imper-sonality' Mary opts for (p. 36), and the reminder that her aloofness from 'intimacies and scenes and contacts' is a 'weakness' (p. 38), begins to sound ironic, even sarcastic. How *are* we to judge Mary; in, for instance, the passage on page 40 beginning 'If she had been left alone' and ending 'hard as rock'? The reader may pity Mary, and yet could, like Marston, stay 'a little disgusted'; for Mary is a character hard to like.

She seemed not to care for men. She would say to her girls, 'Men! They get all the fun.' Yet outside the office and the club her life was entirely dependent upon men, though she would have most indignantly repudiated the accusation. (p. 39)

At the age of thirty, this woman who had a 'good' State education, a thoroughly comfortable life enjoying herself in a civilized way, and access to all knowledge of her time (only she read nothing but bad novels) knew so little about herself that she was thrown completely off her balance because some gossiping women had said she ought to get married. (p. 46)

Is the reader meant to become impatient with Mary? this pathetic woman who lives 'at bottom' from a 'feeling of superiority to men' (p. 46), this 'hollow' (Eliot, again) woman (p. 45)? Perhaps the reader ought to manage to stay just this side of sympathy (but only just?).

Various factors aid the reader in maintaining this position. (Poor) Dick Turner, whom Mary grasps at, and marries, may be more likeable than his wife (Slatter's abuse of his land and labourers offsets Dick's respect for his), but he is weak. His failure to put a ceiling into the house carries irresponsibility to the point of cruelty.

Furthermore, when Mary exhibits her worst characteristics, to Dick and the labourers, the narrator prompts recall of the fact that she has learnt her chilling behaviour from her parents (pp. 57, 83, 95, 121). Such reminders could, however, have the result of de-individualising Mary for the reader.

Towards the end of Chapter 10 and in Chapter 11, the final chapter, in which Moses murders Mary, there is a series of paragraphs which are the longest in the novel: pp. 196-98 has 63 lines; 206-9, 84 lines; 210-11, 65 lines; 216-17, 61 lines. These passages evoke the workings of Mary's mind. The longest of all runs from pages 206 to 209 ('What was it all about? ... It snapped shut: the vision was gone').

Again, sentences of less than ten words punctuate the writing:

I don't understand, she said, I don't understand...  
I don't understand, she said again.

I understand nothing.  
 Even the words were not her own.  
 How many?  
 Long before she had ever come to the farm!  
 Even that girl had known it.  
 But what had she done?  
 And what was it?  
 What *had* she done?  
 Nothing of her own volition.  
 And justly — she knew that.  
 But why?  
 Against what had she sinned?  
 She could see the house, empty, its furnishings rotting.  
 First would come the rats.  
 And then the rains would break.  
 People would search for the house.  
 It snapped shut: the vision was gone.

These sentences, which appear to mark key points in the whirl of Mary's thought, feature questions, and negatives ('don't', 'don't', 'nothing', 'not', 'Nothing', 'empty', 'rotting', 'gone'). They suggest confusion, self-hatred, guilt.

Longer sentences are, as in the 'dust' passage quoted above, repetitious and incremental. Repetition and accretion are perhaps the most powerful elements of Lessing's style. For the reader they are likely to function two ways: to suggest the obsessiveness of the thought patterns of a character, but also, when encountered in novel after novel by Lessing, and when linked to her love of exhaustive analysis (of power relations and of emotional patterns in heterosexual relations, for instance) to evoke a quality of the writer's mind. Repetition and accretion of words, phrases, images, are the main means by which the reader gains the impression of following Lessing to the heart of things, and to deep layers of the psyche.

#### Sentence A

- It was a torment to her, in that momentarily pitiless clarity,
1. *to see herself*. That was how  
*they would see her*, when it was all over, as  
*she saw herself* now: an angular, pitiful woman, with nothing left of the life she had  
 been given to use but one thought:
  2. *that between her and the angry sun was a thin strip of blistering iron;*  
*that between her and the fatal darkness was a short strip of daylight.*

The numbers 1. and 2. mark the two repeated sections, which in the case of sentence 1 are varied. Colons mark the start of incremental parts of the sentence.



The following sentence has similar features:

Sentence B

And time taking on the attributes of space, she stood balanced in mid-air, and while she saw Mary Turner rocking in the corner of the sofa, moaning, her fists in her eyes, she saw, too, Mary Turner as she had been, that foolish girl travelling unknowingly to this end.

The use of colons in sentence A and the word 'and' in B makes for co-ordination instead of subordination: thoughts, insights, judgements accumulate as a weightier and weightier mass, suggesting the obsessiveness of Mary's mind.

While such devices are managed with skill, Lessing's control of point of view (and therefore of the reader's attitude to character and the values involved) is less sure, and this is true of the vital section of the paragraph in which Mary considers her guilt or innocence.

1. The evil is there, but of what it consists, I do not know.
2. Even the words were not her own.
3. She groaned because of the strain, lifted in puzzled judgement on herself, who was at the same time the judged, knowing only that she was suffering torment beyond description.
4. For the evil was a thing she could feel: had she not lived with it for many years?
5. How many?
6. Long before she had ever come to the farm!
7. Even that girl had known it.
8. But what had she done?
9. And what was it?
10. What *had* she done?
11. Nothing, of her own volition.
12. Step by step, she had come to this, a woman without will, sitting on an old ruined sofa that smelled of dirt, waiting for the night to come that would finish her.
13. And justly — she knew.

But why?

Against what had she sinned?

The conflict between her judgement on herself, and her feeling of innocence, of having been propelled by something she did not understand, cracked the wholeness of her vision.

In the first sentence the reader hears Mary's voice rendering her point of view. In sentence 2 the voice is the narrator's rendering either the narrator's point of view or one shared by both Mary and narrator. In sentence 3 voice and point of view appear to be wholly the narrator's, as indicated by the personal pronoun 'she', describing Mary's state of mind. The first part of sentence 4 appears to feature Mary's thoughts indirectly

represented; this is more clearly true of the words after the colon. Sentences 5 to 10 indirectly render Mary's point of view; but whose point of view does the reader receive in 'Nothing, of her own volition' (sentence 11)? Or in 'And justly — she knew that' (sentence 13)? These are both crucial points in deciding the reader's attitude. And there's the uncertainty about point of view in sentence 2.<sup>9</sup> It is one thing for Mary, deranged, to feel irrationally guilty and quite another for her creator to suggest that she has done nothing 'of her own volition' yet is 'justly' to be condemned as having partaken of some 'evil'.

Mary cannot alter the tracks set for her in childhood. The narrator defines this as precisely where Mary fails — until she chooses to do otherwise, but this choice brings her face to face with Moses, and her death:

She rose to her feet with a queerly appropriate dignity, a dignity that left Tony speechless, [clearly, it is the narrator who finds Mary's 'dignity' 'appropriate'] for the protective pity with which he had been going to address her, now seemed useless.

She would walk out her road alone, she thought. That was the lesson she had to learn. (p. 231)

The narrator endorses, by her use of the word 'appropriate', Mary's decision — yet, has not Mary shown a thoroughly healthy instinct in appealing to *anyone* to help her save her life? She cannot appeal to Dick; he is too far gone himself. (And there are further signs, in the description of the murder, that the narrator regards Mary's death as desirable. See Bertelsen, 1985; Hunter, 1987.)<sup>10</sup> Why cannot Mary choose to have a holiday on the coast, as the district doctor recommends? The text closes over these options, and the weight of the narrator's approval is placed behind Mary's self-willed death. The narrator, and 'Africa', it seems, require her death, her guilty self-sacrifice. As Mary dies, the lightning flashes along the blade of the weapon (picked up in the bush) wielded by an agent of 'the bush', an African man, Moses; and then the storm breaks (p. 218). The 'bush', tormented Mary, jilted Moses, and the reader — who has been immersed in Mary's sufferings — all experience relief; and the reader is to understand that Mary has atoned.

But there are serious contradictions here: in no way is the 'bush' or, more importantly, are the African people bettered by Mary's death. Furthermore, while the rational discourse of the novel elicits 'understanding' (besides the sufferings of Mary's childhood, there are those of her marriage: poverty, the heat, the absence of useful and challenging work, the slobbering dogs, the servants whom she loathes and fears, Dick's clumsy sexual fumbings); yet there is also, at some irrational or prerational level a powerful rejection of the character, to the point of

killing her off. The reader is likely to feel horror at the nature of Mary's death, but also to see the worthlessness of this woman who 'gives in' (like Mrs Quest, but unlike Mrs Quest's daughter Martha and unlike Lessing herself), and so to endorse the purging that has taken place. It is not only Mary whose 'vision' is split between 'judgement' and 'feeling': the writer rejects her character, to the point of killing her off. The novel is not merely cautionary, it is also punitive of its protagonist, while even the note of high seriousness on which Mary's death takes place is double-edged in that it entails glorification of an act of (female) self-sacrifice that benefits no-one.

## NOTES

1. Jenny de Reuck, 'Humour and Betrayal: Reading the ALITA Short Stories of Sarah Gertrude Millin'. To be published in Cherry Clayton, ed., *Women and Writing in Southern Africa*, in press.
2. Betsy Draine, *Substance under Pressure: Artistic Coherence and Evolving Form in the Novels of Doris Lessing* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983). Appreciation of the structural elements of *The Grass is Singing* is to be found in the special issue of *Echos du Commonwealth*, Paris, No 4 (February 1978), Bulletin of the Société d'Etudes des Pays du Commonwealth.
3. See Jakobson, 'Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics', in T. Sebeok, ed., *Style in Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 353-59.
4. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1961); *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1974).
5. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1980).
6. Nicole Ward Jouve, 'Of Mud and Other Matter — *The Children of Violence*' in *Notebooks/Memoirs/Archives: Reading and Rereading Doris Lessing*, ed. Jenny Taylor (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982).
7. To quote Jouve at greater length: 'The *fact* that changes of heart are shown to occur in the course of the sequence means that they are not integrated. And they are not, cannot be, integrated, because the voice from the start claims to be inclusive. There is a totalizing intention written into every line of the prose. And it is because of this that one cannot allow the contradictions and lapses to go their own way. Or to signify in the way that, say, gaps would signify in a Balzac, or a Stendahl novel. In the famous passage in which Julien Sorel goes to kill Mme de Renal and in which nothing whatever is recorded of his state of mind, the very absence of verbal matter acts as infinite wealth. Whichever way you choose to interpret it, you know that the truth of the character lies also in what cannot be made explicit — in the non-written as well as in the written. But then Stendhal's prose, his way of jumping from chapter to chapter, of moving across time, has made that kind of interaction between the written and the non-written, black and white (or red), possible. There is an abundance of absence, of 'more'. Nothing remotely like this occurs in Doris

Lessing's prose. You are never given to understand that there is more to Martha than the text gives you — because whenever there is going to be more, or there has been more, the text is going to tell you ... the authorial consciousness, either through, or in default of, its characters, claims to be complete. And this is why it cannot afford contradictions' (pp. 96-97).

8. Fionna Morphet, 'The Narrowing Horizon: Two Chapter Openings in *The Grass is Singing*', in *Doris Lessing Newsletter*, 9, No 2 (Fall 1985), 14-15.
9. Jouve comments, while examining a passage from *Landlocked*, that one 'keeps wondering *who* knows what is being told', and that 'gaps also appear if one wonders who is seeing, and who is speaking from *where*' (p. 120).
10. Evelyn Bertelsen, 'History into Fiction: Doris Lessing's Rhodesia', paper presented at Colloquium on Publisher/Writer/Reader: Sociology of Southern African Literature, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1982. Published in *English in Africa*, 11, No 1 (1984), 15-40. Hunter, 'Marriage as Death': A Reading of Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* in Clayton. Bertelsen emphasises the identification of Moses with libidinal aspects of the colonial (white) psyche; in my article I stress rejection by Mary's creator of the kind of woman who becomes like her mother, a rejection necessary to Lessing (who leaves her family of origin, husband and child, and Africa), and to Martha Quest, in order to gain a wider scope for their intellectual and emotional powers.

## Book Reviews

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Wole Soyinka, *Requiem for a Futurologist*. London: Rex Collings, 1985. 56 pp. £3.25.

Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*. London: New Beacon Books, 1985. 122 pp.

In Soyinka's latest play enlightened demystification and satire are again to the fore, as they were in his earliest dramatic successes, *The Lion and the Jewel* and the Jero plays. This play's action repeats Swift's famous practical joke on the astrologer Partridge. Under the pseudonym of Isaac Bickerstaff, Swift forecast the date and time of Partridge's death with a suitable parade of mumbo-jumbo, and then, when the unfortunate astrologer insisted on maintaining his continued existence 'Bickerstaff' argued that, since his calculations were infallible, Partridge's fraudulent corpse must be masquerading as a living being. In Soyinka's version it is the Nigerian astrologer's servant who publishes his death-forecast, and at the play's climax persuades the distracted charlatan to sham death in order to pacify the mob, furious at seeing a dead man shamming life. Swift's is not the only Enlightenment literary influence apparent in the play. Its tone echoes Jonson and

Molière, and its briskly clever dialogue even occasionally recalls Soyinka's early critical characterisation as the 'Nigerian Bernard Shaw'.

Not that the play is mere pastiche. It has real gusto, and its alternation of crowd scenes with the developing two-hander between servant and master must have provided an efficient theatrical exercise for the Unife students who first performed it. But perhaps its University origin is partly responsible for its distinctly artificial feel. It lacks really arresting theatrical effects and, despite the topical quotations from the Nigerian press which preface it, it fails to develop any local or other distinctive flavour in its treatment of the astrological *motif*. The playwright appears to be returning to familiar ground without any vigorous new impetus, and the play remains a portrait of a charlatan and his wily servant, both of them very close to ancient literary types.

Biodun Jeyifo's *The Truthful Lie* comprises ten short pieces on various aspects of African drama, all written between 1977 and 1982. His approach is one of 'unwavering ideological partisanship', and his references to Hegel, Marx, Trotsky, Brecht and Fanon indicate his critical position. There are essays introducing the dramas of Oyono-Mbia, and Tsegaye Gabre-Medhin, analyses of plays by Fugard, Hussein, Imbuga, and Osofisan, and a fascinating examination of the popular Yoruba travelling theatre. Jeyifo's analyses are sharp and stimulating, if occasionally a little short-winded. Most importantly his Marxism is not of the reductive variety which can work only in terms of diagram, ignoring aesthetic effects. Even when he questions the ideological implications of a play, he does so through a careful exploration of its technical qualities and subtexts. One essay sensitively analyses 'the reductive two-hander' of Athol Fugard, showing how its repressed limitations are transcended (theatrically at least) through plays-within-the-play and the fluid role-construction and role-deconstruction of the characters, as they modulate through the full repertoire of South African racial attitudes. In another essay he concludes that, although the plays of East and Southern Africa are more relevant to 'the urgent and inescapable issues of the epoch' than those of West Africa, the latter 'are often the most stunning, the most formalistically sophisticated that we get on the continent'.

Jeyifo's treatment of the work of Soyinka, his colleague at Ife, quite lacks the pious respectfulness which so frequently afflicts criticism of this writer. His 'materialist, dialectical reading' of *The Road*, instead of tangling itself in metaphysics, focuses on the social class to which the lorry touts of the play belong, the neo-colonial product of 'urbanisation without industrialisation'. This unself-conscious lumpenproletariat is, as Soyinka's modernist treatment reveals, fundamentally aimless and inert. As Fanon has observed, it can only be organised from without, by revolutionary *cadres*, and it is this organising function that Professor incoherently performs. Thus, instead of essentialist metaphysics, Jeyifo finds in the play a 'profound, if only implicit, indictment of the present organisation of life in our society'. And he is contemptuous of those critics 'who have buried this and other of Soyinka's plays in pretentious metaphysical non-meaning'. Here he surely fails to take into account the extent to which the author *himself* is a purveyor of such pretentiousness. His essay's title refers, after all, to a 'hidden class war', and it is scarcely surprising that other critics should preoccupy themselves with the metaphysics under which the author has so dextrously 'hidden' this social theme.

Altogether then this is a valuable and theoretically lively book. One may hope that it does indeed help (in Jeyifo's words) to 'rid our present literary, theatrical and critical culture of its wilful opportunistic political innocence'.

JAMES BOOTH

Michael Wilding, *The Paraguayan Experiment: A Documentary Novel*. Penguin Books, Victoria, 1984.

Michael Wilding, *The Man of Slow Feeling — Selected Short Stories*. Penguin Books, Victoria, 1985.

Is Michael Wilding's novel, *The Paraguayan Experiment* a rehabilitation of William Lane? Or is it an attempt at writing history, that is to say, the history of the New Australia movement, as it really was? The saying goes that there are almost no statues in Canberra and hence we may also ask: is *The Paraguayan Experiment* Wilding's attempt to make a 'statue' of William Lane, to create a culture hero? Or is it really Wilding's own experiment, is it an experimental novel, a truly political one? We know Wilding as an experimental novelist whom we wouldn't hesitate to call post-modern. He is also somewhat of a political activist and on top of that a literary scholar. Wilding, the scholar and historian, has written a long introduction to William Lane's novel *A Workingman's Paradise* (1892). And this introduction is also a very useful and convenient introduction to *The Paraguayan Experiment*. It provides all the relevant documents and 'facts' about Lane. The novel (Wilding's) also provides facts, and it gives an account of Lane's revolutionary movement, but it is at the same time, as the cover of the book says, 'a deft and evocative novel'. Lane, I suppose, is a fairly familiar figure in Australian mythology. He was a journalist, a novelist, a political theorist, a charismatic character who led a group of pioneers out of Australia in order to create the ideal communist utopia in Paraguay. The impetus for leaving Australia was the defeat of certain strikes in 1890-91, something, by the way, which also contributed to the formation of the Labor Party. We follow, in the novel, the preparation for the emigration, the hardships they suffered before they went and when they arrived. Political intrigues in Paraguay, the failures, the disappointments, the development of Lane from a political leader into a sort of authoritarian religious leader. The story itself is a fascinating one to read.

Wilding seems to be completely impartial. He has merely given us the facts about Lane and his movement. It is up to the reader to judge Lane. Is this, then, a rehabilitation of Lane, or is Wilding the historian who gives things as they really were? Or is he doing both? A rehabilitation, one may surmise, is needed since, for instance, Humphrey McQueen in *A New Britannia* called Lane 'an authoritarian racist', a latter-day Messiah, and a utopian socialist. In other words not a true Marxist revolutionary. Others have called his socialism into question by claiming that Lane was 'really' a follower of Henry George and Edward Bellamy. It is true that Lane was a racist who believed in white supremacy. Wilding explains (away) his racism in the introduction to Lane's own novel, but he doesn't comment on it in *The Paraguayan Experiment*. Or rather Wilding doesn't tell, he shows. Wilding is in no sense present in the novel which, by the way, is told by an anonymous observer and participant. But Wilding — or his narrator — is very much aware of the different interpretations of Lane. For instance: did Lane believe in violence as a revolutionary means? This is how the novel *shows* this:

There was a story of how Billy was down in Sydney looking for help for the shearers' strike, when a telegram arrived from Brisbane. 'What's the matter Billy?' 'Let's go, quick.' He hurried off to a gunsmith's and began pricing rifles. The Queensland Defence Force had been called out against the strikers. 'If they use guns,' said Billy, 'so can we.' But this was one of those stories you could never be sure about, whether

it showed Billy's revolutionary commitment or whether it was set-up to implicate him in something he would never have done.

These are the opening lines of *The Paraguayan Experiment*. It is at the same time one of several metalinguistic statements that Wilding seems to relish. Is Wilding's story about Lane itself another story 'set-up to implicate him [Lane] in something he would never have done', or is it the story to 'out-story' all the other stories about Lane, including those told by professional historians and social scientists? Is it ultimately the 'truth' of fiction that you can never be sure of 'those stories'. Another similar metalinguistic moment is found when Lane expresses his dissatisfaction with merely using words. Instead of words he wants deeds. Instead of writing about the ideal society he wishes to practice it. The experiment in Paraguay was a fiction turned into fact. What Wilding then has done is to reconvert the fact into fiction.

Wilding's short stories are full of literary allusions or — as we say today — intertextual ties. The story 'Yet Once More' is a repetition of an earlier story 'The Girl Behind the Bar Is Reading Jack Kerouac'. Its title, of course, refers to 'Lycidas'. Another interesting feature about it is that in the beginning we find the main character reading *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, a book to which Michael Wilding refers in his introduction to William Lane's novel. The story 'The Man of Slow Feeling' makes us think of Mackenzie's novel; the story 'A Month in the Country' of Turgenev's play. In the story 'Joe's Absence' Graham begins to read his friend, Joe's, short stories 'to evaluate Joe's development, to establish whether there was any development'. Similarly we may ask: is there any development? Provided that development is a quality. *The Man of Slow Feeling* contains stories from Wilding's production going back to 1972. It is probably his own selection and his own idea to call the whole selection *The Man of Slow Feeling*. For the story with that title seems to me to be the best one of them all. The earliest stories can be described as a kind of social realism or comedy of manners somewhat like Updike. The most recent ones reflect Wilding's growing interest in and awareness of structuralism or semiotics (the stories from his most recent *Reading the Signs*). There are, however, themes and situations that keep recurring. Many stories are about writers and their girlfriends, usually two writers. Many take place either in pubs or on beaches. I have never read so many stories about sunbathing and getting a tan. Is this the Australianess about them? Perhaps. But on the whole one may conclude that Wilding's forte is as a writer of short fiction. His stories are signs of an unusual inventiveness.

HANS HAUGE

David Malouf, *Antipodes*. Chatto & Windus, 1985. 160 pages.

Given the title of David Malouf's collection of short stories, we might expect that they would present Australian society as in some sense or other an 'antipodean inversion' of the Old World. As Brian Elliott and more recently Ross Gibson have shown, there is a strong 'antipodean tradition' in early European thinking about Australia, and it figures quite importantly in the work of several contemporary Australian writers, notably Thea

Astley, Thomas Keneally and David Ireland. In Malouf's *Antipodes*, oddly enough, the idea does not seem to operate at all consistently as a controlling metaphor or even a rough framework for his representation of Australia. As an interpretative 'key' it lacks purchase on the collection as a whole, though there are one or two stories — the first one, 'Southern Skies', for example — where a case could no doubt be made for its critical relevance.

This negative point is worth making, because it is easy to assume that since Malouf's fiction is nearly always very 'milieu-specific' it is also necessarily 'milieu-centred' in the sense of attempting to define, and in some way thematize, the particular character of the place or culture in question — as 'antipodean', 'peripheral', or whatever. Since his first novel, *Johnno*, which arguably does attempt to 'capture' Brisbane and Australia in a certain way, Malouf has moved away from milieu-centred fiction of that kind towards an exploration of more general philosophical themes — the self, memory, writing — in social and geographical settings which, though concretely rendered, bear no special burden of significance.

Some would say that this adherence to 'universal' themes is what defines 'classic' writing, and that problematical term has already been applied to Malouf's work in general, and to *Antipodes* in particular. Whatever the value of the category, comparison with one of the acknowledged short fiction classics can be quite revealing. Reading *Antipodes* is a lot like reading Joyce's *Dubliners*. As in Joyce, one is naggingly aware that the sense of place, even the quality of personal experience, however subtly and searchingly evoked, is not what the stories are ultimately about. In the *Dubliners* stories submerged symbolic patterns and codes traverse the naturalistic surface of the text, producing meaningful conjunctions and oppositions which are often only distantly related to the 'natural' relationships and actions the stories present: Malouf's stories read the same way.

In a story like 'Bad Blood', for example, ostensibly a fairly straightforward series of episodes in the life of a typical 'black sheep' uncle in Brisbane in the late Thirties, the sense of an abstract pattern underlying the everyday contingencies is powerfully insistent. Here the key element in the pattern, the ordering device if you will, is the notion of 'substitution' — original or genuine things being replaced by inauthentic equivalents — and this serves to define and conjoin elements as disparate as the failure of Uncle Jake's marriage, the disapproval of the narrator's mother (who condemns Jake for what he is not rather than what he is), the boy's response to being left at a neighbour's house rather than the preferable house of Jake's girl-friend Ruby), and the odd behaviour of the said neighbour, Mrs Chard, who makes the boy wear her dead daughter's ballet shoes.

Sometimes the ordering device is less purely conceptual than this. Like most of Malouf's earlier work, *Antipodes* is densely populated by actual and metaphorical machines, all of them performing useful if unspectacular and often unrecognized functions in making the lives of the characters more bearable; even, at times, helping to produce moments of transcendence. The very Joycean epiphany the boy-narrator experiences at the end of 'Southern Skies', for example, is not achieved spontaneously but with the mechanical assistance of a telescope at one end of his body (itself William Burroughs' 'soft machine'), and genital stimulation, courtesy of the Professor, at the other end.

Not all the coded terms in *Antipodes* are as pervasive through the volume, and through Malouf's work generally, as the two just mentioned. His private language has its nonce-words too, images as private and singular as Edith Sitwell's 'emily-coloured hands', like the mango chutney in 'Sorrows and Secrets' or the flying-foxes in 'That Antic Jezebel'. But even these manage somehow to cast a penumbra of meaning beyond themselves, and will no doubt become part of the developing cryptic vocabulary.



*Antipodes* is a challenging work, in a very precise sense. It challenges readers to recognize and respond to a hidden, or at least submerged level of textual meaning-production. In the Australian cultural context such a challenge is rather more than a formal gesture, not only because many Australian readers familiar with the Australian settings of most of the stories tend to assume the adequacy of nostalgic 'recognition effects'. (A Canadian post-graduate student suggested, interestingly, that non-Australians read Malouf in a more consistently 'fabular' mode than Australians.) But equally importantly, the book challenges a central tenet of mainstream Australian literary criticism and review since the 1930s or earlier, namely its prejudice against tropological forms of literary analysis or, more simply, its bias towards the under-reading of literary texts. In its unassuming way *Antipodes*, classic or not, may help to force that protracted moment to its crisis, quietly urging Australian readers, specialist and non-specialist alike, towards quite unaccustomed reading practices: practices which acknowledge the layering of literary meanings in texts and can take account not only of the *sense made* of social experience, but of the *sense-making* process as well.

PATRICK BUCKRIDGE

#### NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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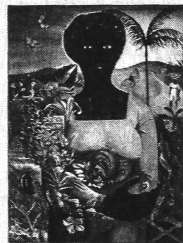
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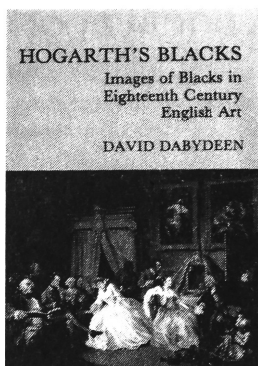
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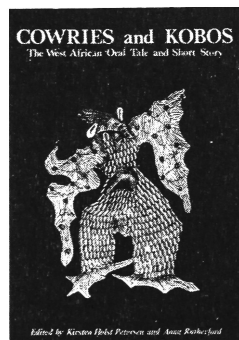
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Aritha van Herk.

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